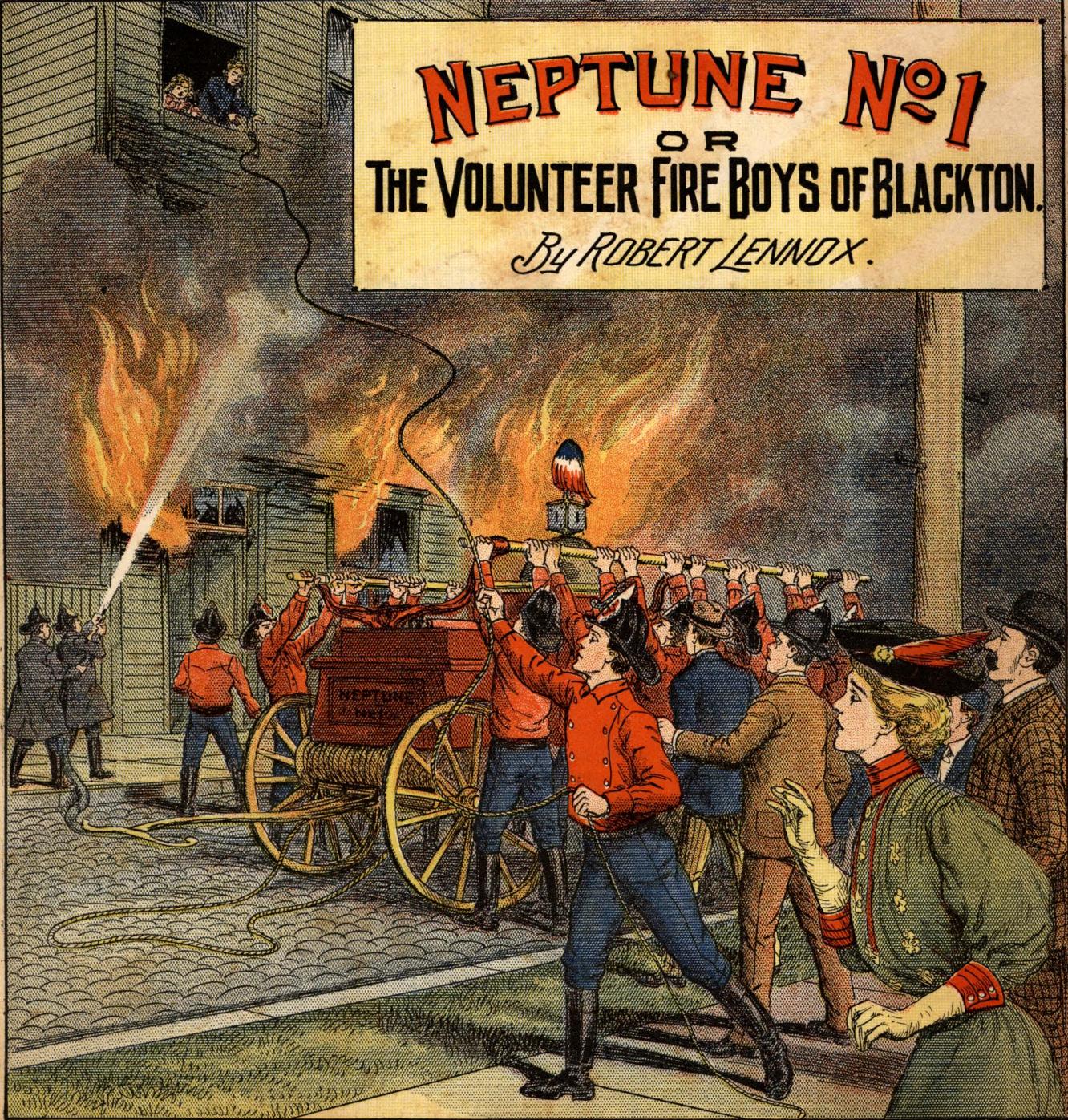


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WIDE AWAKE

A COMPLETE STORY **WEEKLY.** EVERY WEEK.



NEPTUNE №1 OR THE VOLUNTEER FIRE BOYS OF BLACKTON.

By ROBERT LENNOX.

"Catch for your lives!" roared Foreman Dick over all the crackle, throb and din. Straight and true he sent that old, friendly rope to the mother at the window. "Make fast! I'm coming up!" cheered Dick. "If I can live there!" he gritted.

WIDE AWAKE WEEKLY

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NEPTUNE NO. 1

OR,

The Volunteer Fire Boys of Blackton

By ROBERT LENNOX

CHAPTER I.

BOUNCED OUT OF THE FIRE DEPARTMENT.

"Here comes Mayor Sharp," volunteered Matt Rivers, as a buggy turned the corner and rolled rapidly up the street.

"And' he looks mad all the way through," added Hob Sims.

The crowd of youngsters around the open doorway of the fire house of Neptune No. 1 drew back rather hastily as the buggy stopped at the curb.

Mayor Jason Sharp, short, pudgy, but intensely active, came snorting up the short roadway to the fire house.

"Where's Mason?" he demanded.

"Er—Mister Mason is here, Mister Mayor, replied a tall, well-dressed and rather aristocratic young man as he stepped forward.

Fred Mason was foreman of the volunteer crew of firemen who ran with Neptune No. 1.

This engine and crew were stationed in the finest residence part of the thriving, hustling, busy little city of Blackton.

Mason and some score of his friends, most of them belonging to the wealthiest and most prominent families of Blackton, had organized the crew of Neptune No. 1 about a year before.

They had started the whole thing more as a lark, and because most of the members were fond of adventure.

From a fun-loving crowd they had turned Neptune No.

1 into a social club into which all of the young men of the better-to-do families were now eager for admittance.

It stamped a young man in Blackton as being "somebody" socially, if only he could show the handsome gold badge that had been adopted by this exclusive volunteer fire crew.

As Mayor Sharp, who was "only a business man," faced this society young man of Blackton, Fred Mason grew rather haughty, though an amused smile was just visible in his eyes.

"Mason," began the mayor, sharply, "you—"

"Mister Mason, if you will kindly remember the fact," drawled the young man, in his most impudent manner.

"Mason," retorted the city's head, quickly, "be good enough to hold your tongue and remember that you are being addressed by the chief executive of the city!"

"I am listening, sir," replied Mason, more quietly, but with a trace of mockery in his voice.

"Mason, where were you last night?" demanded the mayor, shooting off the question as if it were a gun.

"Do you consider, Mr. Mayor, that you have any right to ask me that question, or that I am bound to answer it?" queried the young foreman, coolly.

The little mayor openly gasped at this impudence; while the members of Neptune No. 1 openly ranged up behind their coolly-spoken leader.

"Do I consider—what?" demanded Mayor Sharp. "Young man, let me tell you what I consider. I consider that, for the present, I am the mayor of this town. As such,

I am particularly responsible for the police and fire departments, and I have full powers. For instance, I can dismiss——”

“Oh, dismiss me, eh?” sneered Mason. “Bah! You can dismiss nothing! I’m not obliged to stay in the fire department, and, if it is no longer to be a place for gentlemen——”

“Stop right where you are,” interrupted the mayor, freezingly.

Mr. Sharp drew from a pocket a pad of paper, from another a fountain pen.

Where he stood, near the doorway, he began to write, repeating the words aloud:

“By virtue of the power invested in me——”

“Humph!” sneered Mason, and winked at the now rather startled young men behind him.

“——and for good and sufficient reason,” went on the mayor, writing carefully, “I hereby dismiss from the fire department of Blackton——”

“No you don’t,” shouted Fred Mason, sharply. “You can’t dismiss me. I withdraw from your old fire department. I’m sick of it!”

From the other members of Neptune One, standing behind Mason came a prompt volley of hand-clapping.

“I hereby dismiss from the fire department of Blackton,” re-read the mayor, “the present foreman, Mason, and every member of the crew of Neptune No. 1.”

Without looking up, Mr. Sharp signed this order.

There was no hand-clapping this time. Instead, there was a blank, astonished silence.

Then Will Rupert, one of Mason’s closest friends, stepped forward, eyeing the stout little old man keenly.

“What does this mean, Mr. Mayor?” Rupert demanded sternly.

He tried to stare Mr. Sharp down, but without success.

“Shall I read the order again?” asked the mayor, drily.

“But this is outrageous, sir!” cried Dabney Platt, another of the bounced firemen.

“Is it?” asked the mayor, quietly. “Then you can have recourse to the courts.”

“But in what light does this high-handed proceeding put us?” demanded Crim Hollings.

“It puts you in the light of mutineers, I suppose,” went on the mayor, calmly. “That’s what you are. You are members of the volunteer fire department. As such you are bound to respond to fires. Yet you were all absent from your posts of duty last night. Haskell’s store was on fire. Volley No. 2 responded, and did splendid work. But where was Neptune No. 1? Its members off at a dance in another town! Yet you call yourselves firemen. Do you understand, young men, that, through your neglect of duty, Haskell’s store was burned to the ground? The insurance companies are out about eight thousand dollars. If they hear of your conduct, the insurance companies may raise the rate a dollar a thousand, perhaps two dollars? Do you imagine that the citizens of Blackton are going to stand for any such conduct?”

“Last night was the night of the DeGraw ball, over at Wheatleigh, Mr. Sharp. All the members of this fire company, being in the social set, were invited to that ball.”

He paused, expecting to see the mayor wince, for that official had not been even thought of as a guest of the DeGraws.

But Mr. Sharp replied promptly:

“Young men who consider their society duties ahead of their duties as firemen are of no use to this town.”

“But this shall not happen again, Mr. Mayor,” urged Will Rupert, trying to make peace.

“No; it shall not, for none of you shall serve the city again while I am mayor,” replied the little old man, curtly. “And now, young men, it seems to me that I should not need to suggest to you that you have no further excuse for lingering here. This house belongs to the fire department.”

“We will go as soon as we are through with our own little talk,” replied Mason, stiffly. “I trust, Mr. Sharp, that you will not feel called upon to intrude on the private conversation of gentlemen.”

“Certainly not,” replied the mayor. “You can have your private chat anywhere that you please, except in a public building.”

“We have decided to hold our chat here,” retorted Mason, still speaking stiffly.

“You can’t,” rejoined the little mayor, doggedly. “Leave this fire department building!”

“We won’t!” flashed Fred Mason, defiantly. “You can’t put us out in this manner.”

“Can’t, eh?”

Mayor Sharp turned crisply on his heel.

As he did so he caught sight of Night Policeman Stearns.

“Stearns,” directed the mayor, halting, “come here. These young men no longer belong to the fire department. I have disbanded their company. I have also ordered them to leave this building, and they refuse. Give them five minutes, officer, in which to leave. If any are inside the building after five minutes, arrest them! If any refuse to be arrested, take their names and get out warrants against them for trespass and resisting a police officer. You understand?”

“Yes, Mr. Mayor.”

“Then do your duty as an officer, Stearns, better than they did theirs as firemen. If you need any assistance, I shall be within call outside.”

As Mr. Stearns left the building, he found himself in the midst of a throng of eager-faced boys, whose ages ranged anywhere from sixteen to eighteen.

“Good evening, boys,” greeted the mayor, kindly.

He liked boys, and was a great favorite with them.

“Good evening, Mr. Mayor!” came the prompt chorus.

Mr. Sharp halted and looked over the little crowd.

“Boys,” he said, slowly, “when you grow up I hope that most of you will feel called upon to take a term in our volunteer fire department. And I hope that all of you who do will take a more serious view of your duties than was

taken by the members of the just-disbanded company, Neptune No. 1."

"We will, Mr. Mayor!"

"Three big cheers for the mayor!"

The cheers were given with a will, while the fat little mayor eyed them in surprise.

"Boys," he remarked, with a twinkle in his eyes, "if you were voters, and old enough to hold office, I should feel certain that you wanted—something!"

"We do want something, Mr. Mayor!"

"Aha! Well, what is it, Citizens of To-morrow?"

"Dick! Dick!"

"Dick Gerald!"

"Tell the mayor, Dick!"

"Yes; tell me, please, Dick," begged the mayor, laughingly, as Dick Gerald, acknowledged leader of the boys of Blackton, was pushed forward by his eager mates.

Dick was not as tall as many other boys of seventeen.

But, for his age, he was broad-shouldered. He was compactly built, and everyone who had gone against him in a foot-ball scrimmage on the common knew that he was strong.

His hair was of the darkest brown; had it been a shade or two darker it would have been black.

His eyes were a deep, rich blue, like the deep sea on a cloudless day.

They were resolute eyes, too, when need be.

But just now they were full of earnestness instead.

For our hero had a wonderful thing to ask of the mayor.

Yet, after the first blush of confusion, this boy, the son of an assistant foreman down at Hampden's Mill, was equal to it.

"Mr. Mayor," he began, respectfully, "may I begin my case by asking a few questions?"

"Why, yes, Dick, if that will help out any," responded the mayor, good-humoredly.

"You go to all the most important fires in town, Mr. Mayor."

"I? Of course."

"And you see about all that there is to see at fires?"

"I try to."

"Have you ever noticed how many boys there are at all big Blackton fires?"

"Have I?" smiled the mayor. "Again, of course."

"And those boys are always eager to help, are they not, Mr. Mayor?" Dick persisted.

"They are," replied the mayor, quickly. "From what I've seen of the boys of Blackton, I should say that they are born firemen."

"That's the stuff," shouted one mischievous imp at the rear of the little crowd.

"Hurrah!"

"Three more cheers for the mayor!"

"What does this mean?" demanded Mr. Sharp, perplexedly. "Come, come, Dick, you're the spokesman, so get on the job."

"Mr. Mayor, you have said that we are born firemen."

"I'll repeat it, if you wish."

"Mr. Mayor, we want to come into our birthright."

"What's that?"

"We want to become firemen—at once."

"How? What? I don't understand, boys."

"Mr. Mayor," Dick Gerald went on, earnestly, "you've disbanded the Neptunes in earnest, haven't you?"

"So earnestly," replied Mr. Sharp, with emphasis, "that they'll never be firemen again, as long as I'm mayor of Blackton."

"That being the case, Mr. Mayor," put in Dick, boldly, "we are going to ask that you allow us to organize a volunteer fire company. We'll take out old Neptune One, and you'll never have cause to say that Neptune One didn't respond."

"But—why, you're only boys," gasped the perplexed mayor.

"That's all right, sir," argued Dick, cheerfully. "You did us the honor to say that we were natural firemen. We want a chance, Mr. Mayor, to back up your statement."

"But I'd have to ask the City Council."

"To-night will be a bully time for that, Mr. Mayor," Dick retorted, smilingly. "The Council meets to-night."

"Yes; in about ten minutes," replied Mr. Sharp, glancing at his watch.

"And you'll ask the Council, sir?"

"Yes; I'll ask 'em."

"Hurrah!"

Again cheers drowned out the mayor, so that he was obliged to hold up his hand for silence.

"I'll ask the Council, boys, but remember that the Council may not say 'yes' to my request."

"But you'll do your best to make the Council say 'yes,' won't you, Mr. Mayor?" pleaded Dick Gerald. "All we want is a chance. If we don't make good, we can be kicked out, just as the old Neptune crew was."

"Blazes!" murmured the mayor to himself. "I half believe I will try to put it through. Boys love to fight fire. These youngsters would do worlds better than any society, dancing-struck dudes could do."

"Boys," called out the mayor, still holding up his hand, "I'm going to try to get the Council to agree to-night. I can't swear in any young fireman who hasn't the written consent of one of his parents. Those of you who can get such consent, and who want to run with Neptune One, be outside the City Hall to-night when the Council adjourns, and I'll bring you the news."

"Hurrah!"

"Three cheers for——"

"No, no, no, boys! No cheers. We haven't time for that. And remember, if the Council does say 'yes,' you'll have to be agreed on a foreman and assistant foreman for your company who will suit me as mayor. Now, be off with you, and leave me to attend to my own duties."

So, without cheering, and almost in silence, the youngsters scurried away just as the door of the fire-house opened

and Fred Mason led out the shame-faced crew who had been bounced from the fire department.

Policeman Stearns locked the door after them and took the key away.

Mason and his friends had plenty of "political pull" in the town.

The boys watched these bounced young firemen go with only half-concealed jeers and grins.

But Mason and his comrades did not linger.

They were in haste to get their friends among the prominent citizens to hurry over to the meeting of the Council.

But all went quietly in the big Council Chamber at the little City Hall until Mayor Sharp about nine o'clock announced:

"The Council will now go into executive session. All not members will please withdraw."

There was an astonished, indignant hush.

"Withdraw!" repeated the mayor, a trifle sharply.

Then, behind closed doors, Mayor and Council deliberated for more than half an hour.

When it was all over the members of the City government came out to the steps of the City Hall.

"Fellow citizens," announced Mr. Sharp, "in the interests of a better fire department, the Council has authorized me to swear in one company of boys. We're going to give 'em a trial as fire-fighters."

Fred Mason and his recent fellow-firemen were in the crowd.

Almost to a man they hissed.

But Mayor Sharp appeared to hear nothing of the hiss.

"All the young men who have the necessary permission from their parents may follow me inside," he remarked.

There was a rush for the door.

Nearly forty boys got inside, Dick being pushed along at their head.

One after another, sitting at the head of the Council table, the mayor received their little slips of paper.

"Really, boys," he announced, "there are so many applicants that I need the advice of those who are to be your officers. Who, do you think, would make the best foreman?"

Back came the answer in a tremendous chorus:

"Dick Gerald!"

CHAPTER II.

DICK TAKES OLD NEPTUNE IN HAND.

"There couldn't be a better choice," beamed the fat little mayor. "And who for assistant foreman?"

"Ted Pond!" came the chorus, as perfectly as if the youngsters had drilled in it.

"Another excellent choice," commented the mayor.

Ted was slim, dark-eyed and dark-haired, and tall.

He was just the sort of fellow that Dick Gerald would be likely to pick out for his best friend.

Ted was quiet, and had a shy look.

But he could rise to any emergency when he had Dick Gerald to lead him on.

"Now, then Gerald and Pond, stand beside me," directed Mayor Sharp. "Help me to pick out the best candidates." Rapidly they were passed upon.

Besides the two young officers, already chosen, only eighteen more boys were needed.

There were more than two applicants for every vacancy.

Had Dick been a politician, he might have had to hesitate, and do much sail-trimming.

But, as he had an eye only to those who would be of the most use in the fire department, he chose quickly, with Ted's help.

Within ten minutes the new crew of Neptune One was lined up for swearing in.

Raising his own right hand, and being followed in this by every new member of the department, Mayor Sharp administered the oath in the most impressive fashion.

This done, he said, simply:

"I'm not going to lecture you on your new duties. Your company is only on trial, and I'm going to let you young fellows show just what you believe your duties to be."

Dick, who had been standing erect, at attention, now asked:

"Are we dismissed, Mr. Mayor?"

"Yes."

"Then, sir, I shall march the new crew down to the fire house to make sure that everything about the apparatus is in order.

"An excellent first move, Foreman Gerald."

Officer Stearns came forward to hand our hero a collection of keys.

"They all fit the fire-house door," explained the policeman. "I made Mason's crowd give 'em up."

Dick passed the keys around.

Then he called:

"Neptune One, fall in outside."

Eagerly the youngsters piled out.

Outside there were still a hundred or so citizens standing by.

Mason and a few of his late comrades still lingered, talking indignantly with a few of the more prominent citizens of Blackton.

"Neptune One, fall in!" called Dick, not loudly, but in a clear voice that carried far.

Most of the boys, having had military drill at the high school, or having seen it there, knew just how to fall in.

Speedily Dick dressed them to the left.

Then his clear commands rang out:

"Twos left—left forward—march!"

Down the street the little company marched, moving with a sturdy military tread, and every boy's heart filled high with pride over the new honor.

At the door of the fire house Dick halted his new company, and broke ranks.

Inside they speedily had the lamps lighted.

Several of the youngsters made a break for the rows of fire helmets standing on hat-pins at the rear of the house.

"Back here!" called Dick, half-sharply. "Never mind

the parade part yet. Attention! We'll look over the apparatus first. Every fellow remember to be attentive, and do just what he's told to."

The first thing was to run off the full length of the two reels.

Dick inspected one line, Ted the other.

Both reported O. K.

Then the buckets, pikes, axes and other implements of fire-fighting were examined and counted.

The working gear of the hand engine—old Neptune—was tested.

"Squeaks a bit," Dick half-grumbled. "Bring me that oil can."

With a very serious look in his eyes he went over the parts that needed oiling.

Next the wheel-hubs of the hand engine were found to be somewhat "dry."

These were well greased.

Then the truck was looked into and overhauled.

It was nearly eleven o'clock that night when the new members of Neptune One felt that everything was in the best shape for a prompt and effective response to any alarm.

"Attention!" called Dick, again.

He had mounted the truck, standing on the rubber blankets that were folded in place over the ladders.

"The first word in this new company," announced the young, foreman "is to be 'discipline.' We're not going to be toy firemen, just because we're young. I'm under the orders of Fire Chief Havens. Ted Pond is under my orders, and the rest of you are under the orders of the mayor or of any officer of the fire department. Is that understood?"

"Yes," came back the chorus, accompanied by hearty nods.

"Now, we're not going to have the trouble that the old crew did. When the alarm rings, we're going to turn out—night or day, pleasant or stormy. The fellow who can't keep that gait will have to get out and make room for some better fellow."

"That's right," approved Ted.

"Of course, once in a while, everyone of you fellows will want a little clear time," Dick went on. "But no fellow shall leave town, or do anything that will put him past answering an alarm, without first coming to me and getting permission. Not more than two fellows shall have permission in the same day. That ought to leave us a full working crew. And, fellows, you may be sure that I don't intend to take any more time off than the rest of you get."

"Oh, you won't, Dick," called Matt Rivers. "You'll be a very fiend for being always on hand. It'll be the rest of us who'll get the evenings away."

There was a nodding of heads at that, for Matt, while a strong boy, and a dependable one in a tight place, was known to be one of the most persistent pleasure chasers in the outfit.

"I suppose, by to-morrow night, we'll have the electric alarm-bells in our bed-rooms," Dick went on. "But, for to-night, remember that you have no calls in the house. So

sleep with both ears open. And now, as it's late, fellows, I guess this will be about all."

"Company's dismissed," Ted Pond added, as some of the fellows did not seem to understand.

"But not the way Mason's Neptunes were, bedad!" broke in Patsy Murphy, at which a laugh was raised.

Dick was the last to leave the fire-house.

He took a careful look around before he put out the last lamp and locked the door.

"I hope we'll be able to prove ourselves some real good," he murmured as he dropped the key in his pocket.

On that homeward stroll he had time to think of something that had been furthest from his thoughts in the last hour of that still September night.

"Foreman Gerald! That sounds well—mighty well," he murmured, proudly.

Then there came a queer flash into his eyes as he added, seriously:

"'Foreman Gerald and Neptune One, well done!' would sound better, he told himself, grimly. "We shall see."

Dick was passing through the "swellest" residence part of the town.

He did not live there, but this street offered him the shortest cut to his own home, a tidy little cottage in which he lived with his father, his mother, and his eight-year-old sister, Nellie.

A block further down Dick espied a figure standing under one of the trees.

As he drew nearer, our hero made out the face of Fred Mason.

Nor was it a pleasant face to look upon just then.

"Mason must feel sore," thought the new foreman of Neptune One.

Mason did, for his opening remark was:

"Well, snipe, how does the new honor wear?"

Dick halted within three feet of the young man.

"What did you call me?"

"'Snipe,' wasn't it?" leered Mason.

"What do you mean by it?"

"Oh, almost anything," drawled Mason.

Dick looked at him fixedly, but hardly angrily.

"Are you trying to pick a quarrel with me, Mason?"

"Neither trying to pick nor avoid one," returned the young man, with more of that same drawling impudence for which he had paid so dearly to the mayor.

Dick still stood eyeing the ex-foreman quietly.

"Well," demanded Mason, angrily, "what do you see about me?"

"Nothing much," Dick smiled.

"What's that?"

Mason, short as the distance was, took a half-step forward, glaring down into young Gerald's eyes.

"You young puppy——" he quivered.

"Stop that," warned Dick, coolly.

"Don't get fresh with your betters, snipe," warned Mason.

"My betters?" asked Dick, wonderingly.

"Perhaps you don't know them when you see them?"

"Do you?"

The question came quietly, simply, but its direct coolness threw the ex-foreman into a greater rage.

"Dick Gerald, you're about the freshest boy I've seen. Now, don't try any more freshness with me, for I'm in no mood to stand it to-night."

"I suppose you must feel a trifle sore," Dick admitted with pretended politeness.

"Now, what do you mean by that?"

The flash in Mason's eyes and the squaring of his shoulders were suggestive of a fight that could be expected at once.

"What do I mean?" Dick repeated. "Why, it's pretty tough, of course, to be told that one isn't fit for the public service of a small place like Blackton."

"Not fit?" quivered the taller one.

"Why, that's about what the mayor said, wasn't it?"

"Never mind the mayor," raged Mason. "Stick to yourself. What do you mean by talking to me in this fashion?"

"Why, I believe you started the talk yourself, didn't you? I thought you had something to say to me."

"So I have!"

"Out with it, Mason, then."

"Don't talk to me in that familiar way, Gerald. Don't forget the Mister to my name when you use it."

"I'll remember when you do," proposed Dick, a smile breaking through his eyes.

"Just as soon as you saw your chance to-night, Gerald, you sneaked up to the mayor, and suggested that he form a new crew."

"Well, I knew that he needed one."

"What was the matter with our crew?"

"That was the mayor's business. He had disbanded your crew."

"But he would have reinstated us as soon as he cooled off."

"I don't think so, Mason."

"Instead of that you silly boys knew the mayor's weakness, and you climbed all around the old dolt and got him to agree to this fool plan of having a boy company."

"Time will show whether the boy company is any good," Dick retorted, icily.

"It will make a laughing-stock of Blackton, just as you've made a laughing-stock of the old Neptune crew!" blazed Mason.

"Whatever has been done to you, you did to yourselves," Dick replied. "For one thing, you were mighty impudent to the mayor of this town."

"You lie, Gerald. I did no more than any fellow of spirit—"

"Any fellow of spirit resents being called a liar," broke in Dick, his fists doubling. "I'll trouble you, Mason, to take that word back."

"You will?" sneered Mason. "Who in blazes are you?"

"A decent sort of citizen on the whole, I believe," returned Dick. "Will you take that word back?"

"You little piece of dirt!" sneered Fred Mason. Dick's fist unclenched.

But, swift as a flash he leaned forward, landing a stinging blow with his open hand across Fred Mason's mouth.

"Just keep your temper, Mason, and talk like a gentleman—if you know how!" came the quick warning.

"What do you know about gentlemen?" flared Mason, drawing back, his own fists doubling again.

"Anything that I know about 'em I didn't learn from you!" taunted Dick.

"You insolent young ragmuffin!"

"I won't hit you for that," said Dick, more calmly. "There's many a fine fellow obliged to wear rags, while some worthless but wealthy loafer, like you, never did anything but go to dances and stand before a looking-glass learning how to put on airs. I believe I'd rather be a good, decent ragmuffin than a thing like—you!"

From which it will be understood that Dick, too, was warming up, though he was fighting hard within himself to keep his temper under control.

Mason, suddenly, without any warning, and just as Gerald thought he was going to back down, let fly with his fists.

Mason was no weakling.

One of his fists landed on Dick's neck with force enough to knock the boy flat.

"Don't get up until you apologize, either," ordered Mason, standing over the fallen boy and glaring threateningly down at him.

But Dick, with a swift roll, carried himself some yards away from his adversary.

Then Dick leaped to his feet just as Mason pounced upon him.

Fred struck out, but Dick dodged and landed on the taller fellow's wind.

"Ouch!" gasped Mason, as he started to stagger.

Swat! Biff! Dick's two fists landed, one on Mason's nose, starting the blood, and the other on his left temple. Around spun Mason, lurched and hit the ground.

"You—young—footpad!" gasped the son of a wealthy father.

He lay where he was, making no offer to get up.

"Got enough, Mr. Impudence?" questioned Dick.

Mason, still lying flat, made no answer.

"I guess you have, anyway," smiled Dick. "I can't believe that you simply haven't the nerve to get up!"

"You—footpad!"

"I'll help you to your feet, if you need assistance," proposed Dick.

"I don't want any of your help! Go home!"

"Why, yes, I believe I will, if my presence is all that is causing you to lie on the sidewalk," laughed Dick, good-humoredly. "Good-night, Mason!"

Dick strode on homeward.

Fred Mason was about to get up, when he heard some one coming.

Closing his eyes, he lay quite still until the new-comers, two of his own friends of the old Neptune crew, stumbled across him.

They tried to revive him, but Mason pretended to be unconscious.

Then they got him home, where, after some minutes of work by the friends and the anxious members of the family, Fred seemed to recover.

"That young scoundrel, Dick Gerald, jumped on me like a footpad," explained Mason, in a pretendedly weak voice. "If he didn't go through me, it was because he heard some one coming, and was scared into running off."

That charge was not made public all at once.

But Mason's friends and family considered how to bring the "crime" back to Dick Gerald, now foreman of Neptune One!

CHAPTER III.

DEATH ON THE FIRE ROPE!

During the whole of the next fortnight Blackton didn't have a fire that counted.

There were two little fires in the downtown business section, not far from the railway station and Hampden's Mills.

But these were in the district of Volley Two. Neptune One didn't respond to calls there, except upon second alarm.

Dick Gerald, however, made the most of this time of rest.

He drilled his boy crew daily, and three times, by permission of the mayor, he turned his lads out on false alarms for practice.

"Sorry th' bit av a foire the town's had, since we came in," grumbled Patsey Murphy, one evening, early, when most of the fellows were gathered in the little hall or club-room at Neptune's home.

"We're mascots for the town, then," smiled Dick. "A town doesn't live by the fires it has and the property that's destroyed."

"But we would like to try our new toys," sighed Matt Rivers.

"Cheer up," urged Dick. "There'll be all you want of it through the year. There always is."

"It'll be just our luck," groaned Hob Sims, to have nothing happen for so long that the Council will disband us as being unnecessary."

Ding! It was the first sharp note of an incoming alarm."

At that first note Dick made a dive for the brass sliding rod that stood up through the center of a two-and-a-half-foot hole in the floor.

He shot down that pole like greased lightning.

Then Ted slid after him.

Down came the other fire lads now, as fast as they could catch hold of the pole.

Dick was still counting. "Eight! That's eighteen," he murmured.

"Av course," growled Patsey. "More wurrk cut out for Volley Two!"

The fire, if there really was one, was not in Neptune's district on a first alarm.

"Now that we're down, we may as well wait," suggested Dick.

"May as well go home and play casino with your sisters," grumbled Matt Rivers. "There won't be anything doing for us to-night."

But Dick, just by way of preparation, threw the doors open.

"Get your helmets on, anyway, fellows. It won't do any harm to be good and ready, if anything should turn in."

As for himself, our hero went over to a little cupboard in the corner, to which he carried the only key.

From this cupboard he took one of the delights of his soul.

It was long, slender, sinuous rope.

Slender as it was, its roughened surface gave good hold for the hands.

Made principally of asbestos fiber, this rope could not burn in the fiercest blaze.

Dick had already donned his fire belt. At the right side was a catch on which the asbestos rope could hang.

Dick dropped it in place and made it fast.

Then he stepped toward the door, looking out.

"Gracious, fellows, b' that looks like something of a blaze, after all," cried Dick, as he saw the sky over the business section suddenly brighten and glow.

Ding! came off the gong. Dong!

"Two! cried Dick. "To your places, fellows!"

After a short pause two came in again.

Twenty-two! That was the signal for a second alarm.

After it the same old box-number started to ring.

But Dick never waited to hear the box number.

There was just one box in Blackton from which a second alarm could come in at this time.

"Run her out, fellows! Whoop!"

Dick was at the pole-end of the hand engine as it flew out of the fire house and turned so swiftly that it was nearly upset.

But with a cheer the machine was dragged onward at an ever quickening pace.

Clattering close behind came the truck, under command of Ted Pond.

Neptune One was off to its first fire under the new crew!

The blaze had now gained such headway that Main Street seemed deserted as Neptune One hustled into it.

The fire seemed to be in Page Street, just beyond Main Street and running parallel with it.

But Dick was already enough of a fireman to know that he must run not to the fire, but to the box.

He turned, therefore, and ran the engine down Main Street to the next corner.

Here he and the fellows with him made a rattling swift turn and headed for Page Street.

At the corner sat Chief Havens, in his buggy.

"Down to Clancy Street, Neptune!" roared the chief. "Get at the back of the fire. I'll follow you!"

Panting, but full of grit and purpose, these sprinting fire lads raced down for the next block.

Around the corner into Clancy Street they raced.

And now they saw the work that was cut out for them!

The fire, starting in a paint-shop in Page Street, had spread to the furniture store next to it.

Back of both buildings the flames had spread, seizing upon a three-story dwelling-house that fronted on Clancy Street.

Through the lower story of this house the smoke was already pouring, backed by an occasional burst of flame.

"Get your stream on that, Gerald, without losing a second!" bellowed Chief Havens.

Then he sat by in his buggy, to see how these young firemen handled their first real job.

"Like veterans!" muttered the chief, joyfully.

For there was not a particle of confusion.

These young lads had been well trained by their foreman.

All in a twinkling the hose was off and coupled with hydrant and engine.

In the same second eager young arms reached up for the bars of old Neptune.

Two nozzlemen, under Ted Pond's eyes, ran forward with the hose.

"Play away, Neptune!" rang Dick Gerald's voice.

"Sizz! Cold water was drenching the blaze now, sending out a steady cloud of steam.

"Good work, Gerald!" called the chief, who, fifty years old, had been a local fireman thirty years of that time.

Dick saluted and smiled at Chief Havens, then darted over to the truck.

A few of his fellows being still unoccupied, he saw them fitted out with axes and pikes.

"Get in over there, and stand by for orders," he cried, and darted in between engine and blaze.

The spectators had formed quickly back of old Neptune.

They were looking on, full of wide-eyed curiosity, to see how these young firemen would handle themselves and the blaze.

But Dick was no grand-stand player.

If he knew the crowd was there, he gave it never a thought.

He was on the job to put out the blaze in the lower part of this building.

"See, Ted," he called in his chum's ear over all the racket, "aim the nozzle a little lower, and get in under that tongue of flame. That's where the hottest part of the fire is."

Ted passed the order on to his two nozzlemen.

The stream was lowered, sending back a cloud of steam that drove them back a foot or two.

"Keep it there—steady!" ordered Dick, and turned back to see what his axe-men and pike-men could do, if anything.

But he saw nothing, just then, for these extras to do.

"Looks as if there could be a bit more pressure from the hydrant," murmured the young foreman.

He ran around the Neptune, to the further sidewalk.

Yes; a short turn gave more force and volume to the stream.

Then his eyes glanced upward along the building, and noted an open window.

"Is every one out of that house?" he bellowed, to no one in particular.

"They'd better be out," muttered Matt, who stood by his side. "We could never run ladders up there. The flames would eat the rungs off in thirty seconds."

But, just as Dick was turning his eyes away, a woman's face appeared swiftly at that open window.

Then came the woman's shriek.

Two children, white-faced with terror, stole to her side, looking in terror down over the sills.

"Save me! Can't you?" appealed the woman, desperately. "Save these children, anyway."

In her desperation, the woman was climbing up on the sill.

"Get back there!" shouted Dick, tugging at the asbestos coil at his belt. "Wait, and do just what we tell you."

"We can't run a ladder up there!" cried Chief Havens, who had jumped from his buggy.

"I know it, sir," Dick answered. "But I'm going to get up there and get them out!"

"How?"

"I can show you quicker than I can tell you, sir," replied the young fireman.

Dick had the asbestos rope uncoiled. Looking up at the window, he saw that the woman's fascinated gaze was upon his face.

"Catch—for your lives!" roared Foreman Dick over all the crackle, throb and din.

Straight and true he sent that old, friendly rope to the mother at the window.

"Make it fast! I'm coming up!" cheered Dick.

"If I can live there!" he gritted under his breath.

"I've tied the rope inside the sill!" called down the woman, hoarsely.

Dick nodded, then ran to Ted Pond.

"Play the hose on me for a moment. Give me a good drenching," he ordered.

Ted had the quick intelligence to obey.

Dripping with the cold water, Dick Gerald ran a few yards up the street, gave a swing of the rope, and then, clutching and mounting higher, he shot up.

Higher he climbed, holding on with all the strength of his young muscles.

But now, from below, a sudden, savage burst of greater tongues of flame burst out, driving the young nozzlemen still further back.

And Dick Gerald hung in mid-air just over those lapping red tongues!

The gust of heat and smoke that came up were awful.

"Good heavens!" quavered Chief Havens. "The lad can't get down at all now!"

"He's gone to his death!" shuddered more than one onlooker.

Then, fascinated by the splendid sight, the crowd stood watching this cool battle for life!

CHAPTER IV.

DIRTY WORK AGAINST NEPTUNE'S CREW.

"You can do nothing for us, now, I'm afraid," sobbed the frightened woman, as Dick Gerald reached the sill.

"Get back, please, so I can get in," he directed, crisply.

As the woman shrank back, drawing her terrified children after her, Dick bounded through the open window.

Like a flash he wheeled and looked out.

"Spread out the rubber blanket, and hold on to it hard!" he shouted down. "Get volunteers from the crowd to help you!"

Ted Pond understood, if no one else did.

Dick turned around to seize the larger of the children.

"What are you going to do?" shuddered the woman.

"Throw your child down into the blanket."

"You'll miss. It'll be like murder!" shrieked the woman.

"Madam, I'm doing the only thing possible, and neither child will be hurt a bit. Stand back, there! Don't grip my arm, unless you want to see the child fall short and strike the pavement! Keep cool, madam, for an instant, and give me a chance to be cool myself."

Far out over the sill leaned Dick, the child in his arms.

"Hold steady down there!" he called, but cheerily. "A life is at stake! Now! Here you are!"

Leaning still further forward, he tossed the child out, well clear of the flames and safely into the blanket.

Eager hands snatched the child instantly, drew it out of its cradle in the blanket and set it on its feet.

"Oh, thank heaven!" sobbed the woman, devoutly, as she peered down, almost afraid to look.

Dick faced her with laughing eyes.

"Why, it's easy, madam. Watch your other child go!"

Dick wheeled, snatching up the little tot, who cried out.

"Don't be afraid, little one," reassured Dick. "This is fun—the kind you don't have every night!"

Looking down, he shouted to the circle of blanket-holders:

"Steady, there!"

"Go ahead!" came up from below.

Dick made the throw, as good a one as before.

Now, both children stood looking up, stretching their arms appealingly toward the woman.

"Oh, mamma, come quick!"

The woman, now that her children were safe, was calmer.

"What are you going to do with me?" she queried, with almost a smile in her eyes. "You can't throw me."

"No," Dick admitted, regretfully. "I can't. I wish I could."

Then, leaning down, he bawled:

"Ted, fasten the hose to the bottom of the rope. In a jiffy, now!"

In a twinkling Dick Gerald was hauling the length of hose in through the window.

"Madam, get a grip on yourself," ordered the young foreman, grimly. "I've got to souse you with cold water."

"What—"

"So your clothing won't get on fire when we go down on the rope together," Dick explained, briefly. "Here it comes."

He turned the stream on her, drenching her well from head to foot.

Bracing herself, with her hands against the wall, the woman endured it gaspingly, for that volume of cold water was breath-snatching on this chilly evening.

Then Dick gave himself another brief sousing.

Next he lowered the hose, Ted earning scorched eyebrows in his effort to cast the hose off.

"Hold on to that end of the rope, Ted," called down Neptune One's young foreman. "Stand by to follow orders."

Then to the woman:

"Up on the sill with you, madam!"

Having seen what this splendid young fire hero had done in saving her children, the woman seemed now to have unbounded confidence in Gerald.

Truth to tell, Dick had far from as much confidence in himself at this fearful moment.

"What are you going to do?" she asked, calmly.

"We're going down this rope together, madam. Get hold of it with both your hands. Good! Now, I'll put one arm around you to help you, and use the other hand to hold on myself. Don't be afraid, and use every ounce of muscle you've got. Now, then—go!"

Under Dick's guidance, and aided vastly by his generous strength, the woman slid slowly down, Dick with her.

That good old asbestos rope stood the strain nobly.

But soon they were down to where they felt the scorch of the fearful heat from below.

"Swing the rope out, Ted!" called the young foreman.

Waiting for just that order, Ted Pond, Matt and Patsey pulled the rope well out into the street.

Thus down an inclined plane slid Dick and his precious charge.

They were scorched and steamed a bit, by the heat acting on the water in their clothing, but they were not seriously burned.

Soon willing hands reached up and took the woman down to complete safety.

Dick, with a laugh, dropped lightly to his feet.

"Nobly, splendidly done, Gerald!" cried Chief Havens, laying an arm on the young fireman's shoulder.

In the meantime, friendly people were hustling the drenched, steamed woman, with her children, off to a house where dry clothing could be had.

"Just one more rescue," laughed Dick, to the chief.

"What?"

"My rope!"

"But that's fast up there."

"I know it, chief. I'm going up to get it!"

"Don't you venture—"

But with a laugh, and a run backward, Dick swung off the ground from a distance.

Then, as nimbly as a gorilla, he went up the rope, hand over hand, and so again gained the sill.

Whew! But it was hot and stifling up here now!"

But groping, choking, strangling, Dick found where his rope had been fastened and unknotted it.

Once more he leaned out of the window.

"The blanket—get it out!" he bellowed down.

Willing hands stretched that blanket that did duty as a fire net.

Of heavy rubber, it was strong enough to sustain a great weight when well held.

"Hold hard," Dick shouted down. "I'm no ten-pound baby."

"Come on—careful!" Ted shouted back.

Standing on the sill, first casting down his precious asbestos rope, Dick measured the distance, nerved himself for the wide jump, and then—leaped.

He struck the blanket fairly, but his weight, aided by the great force of his fall, all but tore the blanket out of the hands of its holders.

For just one sickening instant Dick Gerald believed he was to strike the pavement and be crippled.

But, with a cheer, the blanket-holders pulled upward.

The shock was stayed, and he bounced upward.

Dick rolled over, then stepped out of the scoop of the blanket—uninjured.

"That was splendid, Gerald, but foolish!" cried Chief Havens, hoarsely, as he gripped the boy's arm. "No more of that to-night."

"No more need of it," laughed Dick, then bounded back to the nozzlemen.

The stream was not making great headway, but now the front of the building was burned out enough so that pikemen could find something yielding to take hold of among the blazing timbers.

So, under Dick's cool direction, many of the blazing timbers were hauled down and played upon.

Then into the house they dragged the hose, backed by pikemen and axemen.

Thirty minutes later Dick, grimy but supremely happy, came almost staggering out of the building to report:

"Chief, we've got the fire under control on this side. The house won't be anything like a wreck."

"Gerald," cried the chief, "I'm proud of you and your fellows. I shall tell the mayor so."

"The mayor has heard already," broke in a voice behind them.

Mayor Sharp stood there, looking supremely happy over his latest venture in public management.

On the spur of the instant Mr. Sharp turned to Fred Mason, who stood almost within arm's length.

The mayor did not realize that the young lady standing nearby was under Fred's escort, or His Honor might not have spoken as he did:

"Mason, now you see what real firemen are! I'm afraid I never saw your crew do anything like that."

Fred Mason, mindful of the girl who was with him, drew himself up stiffly as he rejoined:

"Mr. Sharp, I've nothing that I care to say to you. Good-night, sir!"

Fred would have turned on his heel, but the girl with him murmured:

"Don't let us go yet, Fred; I want to see more of the work done by these boys."

"It's no use staying, May," he pleaded, almost crossly.

"The fire is out."

"But I must stay and thank that young foreman for his splendid work with that frightened mother and her children."

"Nonsense, May! That's a part of a fireman's duty."

"But I think I heard the mayor say that he never saw you do anything like that, Fred," observed the girl, swiftly.

"Oh, Mayor Sharp is sore on me," retorted the young man, disconcerted.

"Why?"

"Because—because he wants to get into our set of society here in town, and I haven't helped him. That's all."

"No matter, Fred. I must stay and thank that young hero."

"It's foolish, I tell you, May."

But as Fred made a gentle move to walk away, the girl, on his arm, stood still.

Fred Mason was very fond of May Everard.

In the first place, she was the belle of the little town, and of several towns around.

She was rather tall, of lithe, splendid figure. Her dark, hazel eyes could look wonderfully tender when she felt in that mood, or could flash at need.

Her face was of the purest type as to features.

Her whole look was queenly, yet she had no desire to be a queen among women. Instead, she preferred to be on sweet terms with every one.

Undoubtedly she was the most loved young girl in Blackton.

She was the most sought, too.

In addition to being the sole daughter and heiress of a wealthy, widowed mother, May had become, almost by accident, since she had not sought it, the society leader among the younger women.

Fred Mason had been keeping company with this lovely girl during the past year.

There was no engagement between them. Indeed, no actual word of love had been spoken.

Often times Mason had felt on the verge of proposing, but something in May's eyes, or in her manner, checked him.

Just the same, these young people were much together. They liked each other, plainly, and local gossip said they would soon make a match of it.

May was usually so gentle that her hanging back on his arm now rather astonished Mason.

"The fire is over," he said, trying not to speak crossly. "It is time I was taking you home anyway, May."

"Not until I have spoken to that young hero of the firemen."

Now Mason forgot himself in his sudden temper.

"That is all nonsense, May," he cried, angrily.

She looked swiftly up into his face.

"How long since you have felt privileged to talk to me in that manner?" she asked.

There was a warning in her voice, and Mason ought to have heeded it.

Instead, he plunged blindly into the danger.

"May, I do feel that I have a right to prevent you from making a fool of yourself."

The girl dropped his arm at once.

"You are speaking rather strongly, Fred."

"But I can't have you associating, even for a few moments, with any young tramp like Dick Gerald."

May took a couple of steps away from her escort, looking at him in astonishment.

"Mr. Mason," she said icily, and in a way that made him realize how far he was going, "will you take my word for it that you have nothing at all to say as to who my acquaintances shall be?"

"Why, May—I—I—" stammered Mason, going close to her.

But the girl again drew back.

"Do you know young Mr. Gerald?" she asked.

"I ought to," flashed Mason.

"Then you will introduce me?"

"No! By the lord Harry, no!"

His face was ablaze with anger now.

"That is all, Mr. Mason. Good-night."

She turned and walked deliberately away from him.

Mason, conscious that several people who knew him well were looking on either in surprise or amusement, glided after the girl.

"May—" he began huskily.

"Good-night, Mr. Mason."

"But I—"

"Good-night."

"May, you are not going to get rid of me as easily as that."

The girl halted, eyeing him coolly.

"Then I shall appeal to the police to protect me from annoyance, if you make it necessary. Good-night!"

This time Mason did not attempt to follow.

There was that in the girl's resolute manner which made him afraid of a scene.

After his recent spectacular bouncing from the fire department, he did not care for the further absurdity of being arrested for annoying a young woman.

With a curse, uttered under his breath, and his face very white, Fred Mason turned and went off in his own direction.

Ere May had gone a block, she met Will Rupert, another of her admirers.

He halted in surprise at finding her alone, then asked the pleasure of acting as her escort.

May smilingly nodded.

"By the way, Will, do you happen to be acquainted with young Foreman Gerald, of the Neptune crew?"

"I should say I do," smiled Will.

"Then I am going to ask you to take me back and introduce me. I want to thank that splendid young fellow for the way he rescued one of my sex this evening."

"Yours to command, May," replied Rupert, offering her his arm.

Together they walked back, arriving opposite the engine and truck just as Dick had seen to stowing away the last of the hose and the small apparatus.

"Oh, Gerald," called Rupert, from a little distance.

Dick turned, saw the handsome girl beside the former member of the Neptune crew, and stepped over, hat in hand.

"Miss Everard," began Will, easily, "permit me the pleasure of introducing Mr. Richard Gerald."

"Oh, I am so glad to meet you," cried the girl, her eyes beaming as she daintily offered her hand, which Dick took warmly. "I asked Mr. Rupert to introduce us."

"I am greatly honored," said Dick, gallantly.

"Not as I wish you could be," replied the girl, honestly. "I witnessed your splendid work to-night, and I wanted to speak to you and thank you for it. Any woman should feel grateful at seeing one of her sex so splendidly rescued."

"Why, it's all in the fireman's duty," smiled Dick, unaffectedly. "Still, Miss Everard, since it has won your praise, I am selfish enough to be glad that it was I, instead of one of my comrades, who won your approval."

"Why, the little beggar talks like an educated man of the world!" thought Rupert, in amazement.

"I shall take a great interest in your new fire company," the girl went on pleasantly. "Every one in Blackton ought to, especially the younger people. Won't you call, soon, so that I may talk with you about your company? You young men will soon be wanting new uniforms, new apparatus, or new or extra something, I know. Now, if you do, it should be both the duty and pleasure of the younger people of the town to get together and run a fair, or some entertainment in honor of you splendid young fire-fighters. Do promise that you'll call, Mr. Gerald."

"Why, you couldn't find any way to delight me more, Miss Everard," murmured Dick, and he meant it, too, for, as he found himself gazing, at close quarters, into this

girl's lovely face, he felt a sudden thumping around the heart.

"Then I may look for you—say, to-morrow evening?" asked May.

She had an appointment with Fred Mason for that next evening, but perhaps she was malicious enough to enjoy the idea of sending a note to Fred telling him that she had formed other plans.

"Why, I'm sure I can come up to-morrow evening, Miss Everard—that is, unless there's a fire," Dick made reply.

"I shall be expecting you then, at eight. Again I thank you for that splendid rescue. Good-night, Mr. Gerald."

May went away on Rupert's arm, but she left a slave behind in the person of young Dick Gerald.

"Moving in society, eh?" whispered Ted Pond, as our hero came lightly back to his crew.

"I was just introduced to a very charming girl," Dick replied.

The apparatus of Neptune One was put back in the fire-house in apple-pie order.

Then Dick and some of the young fellows strolled up to Main Street, halting just around the corner for a few minutes' chat before they separated to go to their homes.

The chat was all about fire work.

So interesting did it become that, ere the boys noticed it, three-quarters of an hour had slipped by.

It was Dick who discovered the time.

"I left my watch at the fire-house," he muttered. "I must go back and get it."

"I'll go with you," suggested Ted.

Together they walked briskly down the side street.

"Is that some one hurrying along there, down by Neptune's house?" asked Dick, suddenly.

"Some one going home late, maybe," Ted suggested.

"Come on," urged Dick, setting off at a run.

But by the time that they gained the fire-house no one was in sight.

"Just imagination, I reckon," observed Ted.

Dick took out his key, unlocking the door and stepping inside.

He knew just where to go, in the dark, to get his watch. But some impulse made him light one of the lamps.

"Oh, Ted, look there!" cried Dick, piteously.

He was pointing to the hose.

Some one, after a good deal of work and with an energy worthy of a nobler deed, had slashed several gaping holes in the length of hose-pipe!

"Suppose there had been a fire, and we'd been called out to-night," gasped horror-struck Ted.

"I reckon that was just what the hose was cut for—to throw disgrace on us!" muttered Dick, wrathfully.

CHAPTER V.

A GOOD GUESS!

"Humph, it's a fool trick, unless a fellow can know for sure that there's going to be a fire."

"Perhaps some one did know that there would be a fire to-night," muttered Dick.

He spoke on the impulse of the moment.

Yet, as he saw Ted start, Dick himself suddenly became swiftly thoughtful.

"Good heavens, Ted!" whispered the young foreman. "What if the scoundrel who did this really means to go to the greater length?"

"But who would do such a thing as set a fire on purpose? We haven't got any such people in Blackton," protested Ted, loyally.

"But who in Blackton would do such a thing as cut up fire-hose? The person who would do that wouldn't be above setting a fire."

It all seemed highly improbable and unreasonable.

Yet, the more Dick thought over matters, especially with the slashed hose lying right before his eyes, the more probable it seemed that some one might be planning to start a fire at which the young Neptunes would be disgraced.

"Who could have done such a thing?" Dick wondered.

"Who?" voiced Ted. "Unless—unless some of the old Neptune?"

"I can't think that, either," muttered Dick, shaking his head. "There was only one who disliked me particularly. He—"

"Good evening, boys," hailed a voice from the doorway.

It was night Policeman Stearns.

"I saw you chaps come in here just a moment ago, and wondered what was up," declared the officer.

"You saw us come in just a moment ago, eh?" echoed Dick.

"Yes; I was down the street and I saw you fitting the key in the lock."

"And you're sure we've been here just a moment?" pressed our hero.

"Certain I am. Why?" asked the officer, looking puzzled.

"If you know that we've been here just a moment," throbbed Dick, pointing, "then you know that we didn't do THAT!"

The policeman's wandering gaze rested on the slashed hose. He gave a start.

"Jumping Jehoshaphat! Who did that?"

"That's what we want to know," blazed Dick, wrathfully. "You know, Mr. Stearns, that we didn't have time to do it."

"I don't see how you could, boys."

"Chief Havens must be notified."

"Certain. I can do that over the telephone from the drug store."

"Will you do that, Mr. Stearns? And will you tell Chief Havens that we don't know who the criminal was, but that we hope to find out before the night is over?"

"I'll tell him," nodded the policeman. "Sho! This is rotten-bad work for some critter to be doing."

The policeman shuffled away. Dick put out the lamp.

Then, at the doorway, the two young men looked into each other's eyes.

"Who can you suspect?" queried Ted, his voice quivering.

"I hate to name the one I suspect!" muttered Dick.

"I wonder if it could have had anything to do with the scene at the fire to-night?" mused Ted.

"What scene?"

"Why, Miss Everard was there with Fred Mason. They seemed to have some sort of a dispute. Then Miss Everard walked away alone. Fred Mason caught up with her, but he couldn't seem to make up matters with her, and she went away. Next thing I knew, she came back with Will Rupert, and then you were called over and introduced to her."

"That looks odd," mused Dick. "But what bearing could it have on this matter?"

"Do you mind telling me what Miss Everard said to you?" hinted Ted.

"She thanked me for rescuing that woman, and said the young folks of the town ought to get up a fair, or something, for the benefit of the boy firemen. She invited me to call at her house to-morrow evening."

"Oho!" quivered Ted. "And Fred Mason has heard all this, and he doesn't like you any too well, anyway?"

"No," admitted Dick. "He and I had a fight awhile ago."

"You did? You never told me a word!"

"It wasn't necessary, Ted. It wasn't much of a fight anyway."

"When did it happen?"

"The night we were sworn into the fire department."

"Well!" blazed Ted. "Don't things look clear, though? Fred Mason isn't any too sweet-tempered at best. You got his fire company away from him. Then you fight. Who won?"

"I suppose I did."

"Then you trounced him. Next, he and his girl have trouble over you. Then she invites you to call. Say, why wouldn't a fellow like Fred Mason want to do some dirty work against you?"

"It does look that way," Dick admitted, his eyes blazing. "But if Fred Mason did that, or had it done"—pointing to the slashed hose—"then he's a scoundrel who ought to be hung! It's a fearful thing to cripple a fire department, that has to do with saving human lives as well as ordinary property!"

"I reckon we've about made a straight guess about this job," muttered Ted Pond, sagely.

"But, good heavens! Do you suppose, Ted, there's any chance that Mason would start a fire, or have one set to-night, just so that we'd be disgraced?"

"Will he do it?" muttered Ted. "I don't know. I can't judge. I never was crazy, myself."

"It's an awful thought," muttered Dick, uneasy and shaking.

"What are you going to do?" Ted wanted to know.

"The figure that we thought we saw skulking here vanished in that direction," cried Dick, pointing.

"Sure!"

"And that's the way to Fred Mason's home."

"Right again."

"Ted, it's a fearful thing to suspect any one of. Unless we get some real proof against Mason, promise me that you won't repeat a word of this to anybody?"

"I couldn't be mean enough, unless it was to unmask a scoundrel," Ted declared.

"I don't know what to do, old fellow. But, at least, it can do us no harm to take a stroll down by Mason's home."

"And see if we can find what he's up to?"

"Oh, we'll find out anything that we can."

Dick carefully locked the door of Neptune One.

Then, in the darkness of the night, they went swiftly though softly in the direction of the Mason home.

It was so late at night that all the houses in the neighborhood were in darkness.

In the Mason house there was a dim light in the front hallway.

Upstairs, a light shone faintly around the edges of a curtain in one of the rooms upstairs in the wing.

"I believe that's Fred's room," whispered Ted, as the two boys stood in the shadow of a big tree opposite.

"I wish we knew for sure," breathed Dick.

"Why? If Fred is in his room, and keeps there, then he isn't going to do anything outside."

"But we don't know that he will stay there," Dick argued. "If that is his room, then he's the only person in the house that is up. If he's going to bed, why doesn't he hurry up about it and turn out the light?"

For some minutes the two young firemen stood there, watching that window and the rest of the house in perplexity.

"There goes the light out," whispered Ted, at last. "Now, I reckon Fred's going to bed."

"Or else out," uttered Dick, grimly.

In quivering suspense the two lads waited and watched.

"Ah!"

The sound was barely audible from Dick, hiding behind the great tree.

The front door of the Mason home was opening.

In the dim light of the front hallway Fred Mason stood revealed for a moment, ere he closed the front door softly behind him.

At the gate, Mason stood listening and looking around him for a few moments.

But the boys across the way were taking wonderfully good pains that he should not see them.

At last Fred Mason left the front gate and started briskly, though softly, away.

Never did two lads shadow any one more carefully!

Fred Mason seemed bent on taking the quieter streets.

In time he led the boys, and by a pretty direct route down to the railroad station.

That building stood away from all others, except for a

little switch-house at a distance of a hundred and fifty yards.

At this late hour of the night the station was in darkness.

"What on earth is he going to do around here?" quivered watchful Dick.

There was hardly an instant's delay.

Fred Mason walked around to the rear of the railway station.

What he was doing there the boys could not make out in the darkness.

But in a second or two there came the sharp sound of a match being struck.

Almost instantly flames began leaping up the wooden wall of the station building.

In that same instant Fred Mason took to his heels.

"The scoundrel, he has thrown oil and lighted it!" breathed horrified Dick. "Ted, streak it to the corner and turn in the alarm! Fly! I'll go after that crook and catch him!"

CHAPTER VI.

AT THE BOTTOM OF THE MUCK-HEAP.

Each young fireman sped away on his own errand. Mason was a good runner.

He made a wonderful spurt as soon as he heard flying feet behind him.

But Dick Gerald was one of the best runners in Blackton.

"Don't be in such a hurry, Mason!" called the boy, tauntingly, as he gained on the firebug.

At the sound of his name the fugitive halted like a flash.

As he stopped, he dodged to one side, then came up facing his enemy.

"You, Dick Gerald!"

"It's you, I see, Fred Mason! First you cut our hose; then you start a fire!"

"I didn't start that fire!" gasped Mason, hoarsely, flashing a look at the blazing, crackling wood.

"Unfortunately for you, I saw you do it."

"You lie!"

"Coming from you, at this time, that don't amount to anything," jeered Dick.

"What are you going to do?"

"Going to place you under arrest, Mason!"

"You've no right to."

"A fireman has a right to grab a firebug wherever he finds him—and I'm going to!" proposed Dick, very decidedly.

Peal! It was the first note of the town fire-alarm.

Mason started.

"Who turned in that alarm—so soon?" he demanded, hoarsely.

"Another member of the department."

"What?"

"You're not deaf. You heard what I said," retorted Dick, eying his man watchfully.

"Good-bye!" jeered Mason, suddenly.

He dodged, wheeled, and started to run.

But Dick Gerald, watching for the trick, bounded after him.

Within five steps he had one strong arm on Mason's coat-collar.

"You can't get away as easily as that," vaunted the boy.

"Then I'll kill you!" hissed the terrified wretch. "I won't be caught!"

"You are caught—already!"

Mason made a savage effort to kick Dick in the shins.

But the young fireman jumped over the attacking leg of his enemy, and without letting go his hold.

"Going to give trouble, are you, Mason?"

With that, Dick gripped in earnest, bending his enemy over backward.

Down to the ground went both.

And now Fred Mason fought as savagely as if for his very life.

But Dick, being the cooler and braver of the two, held on in grim determination, resolved that nothing but his own death should let his captive get away.

At the same time, Gerald defended himself with all the cunning that he possessed.

"Want any help?" panted Ted Pond, running up, breathless.

"None, I guess," gritted Dick, as, with a sudden twist, he raised himself on top of the bigger fellow and got a strangle-hold on Mason.

"I'll sit down on his feet, just for ballast, anyway," proposed Ted, coolly, as he suited the action to the word.

Fred Mason, snared as he was, had sense enough to know that any further fight was out of the question.

"See here, Dick Gerald," he gasped, "you don't mean to put me through on this story?"

"I'm afraid I'll have to," replied Dick, soberly.

"But think of my father and mother."

"You didn't—it seems."

"This would break their hearts."

"The bad deeds of worthless sons almost always do," replied Dick, still more soberly. "But that's no reason for letting crooks get away."

Mason thought not only of his parents, but of his social standing in the town, of his many acquaintances, and of May Everard.

He felt the cold sweat of despair oozing out on his forehead.

"See here, boys," he proposed, desperately, as the fire alarm ceased its clanging, "I've got two hundred dollars, a gold watch and chain, a diamond pin, two or three rings. They're all yours if you'll let me up this instant, and hold your tongues afterward."

"No go!" retorted Dick, shortly.

"I can get almost any amount of money to add to it in the morning," pleaded Fred, in a quaking voice.

"No go!"

"Don't say that! For heaven's sake let me up!"

"Yes; when the police get here!"

Fred Mason groaned in more abject terror than he had ever known in his life before.

Up in the town he could hear the clanging of bells as the apparatus was being drawn swiftly to the fire.

Down here by the station the flames lit up everything, for the railway station now looked like a hopeless blaze.

"Here they come—Neptune One!" throbbed Ted, as the first apparatus to the scene showed up at the edge of the circle of light cast by the flames.

Dick felt a thrill of pride that his crew, even without leaders, should be the first to the scene.

"Neptune One—over here!" he shouted.

With a yell of astonishment the boys, who, half about halted, took on another spurt and raced toward their young foreman.

"Dick," burst out Matt Rivers, "some scoundrel cut our hose."

"I know," said Dick, briefly. "We've got him here. He set this fire, too!"

"What's that? Fred Mason?"

"He's the jigger!" confirmed Ted, drily.

There were many, now, to help hold the criminal.

Fred Mason, his face a strange mixture of ashen-white and sickly green, was allowed to stand on his feet, held by both arms and surrounded by wrathful-faced boys.

"No need of doing anything over at the station," shouted Dick. "You couldn't do a blessed thing without water, nor much with it. Wait for the chief to give us our orders!"

Volley Two's bell could be heard, now, as it turned the corner and raced toward the burning building.

Close behind it was the clanging gong on Chief Havens's buggy.

Then the chief drove swiftly up into the circle of blazing light.

"Police here!" shouted Dick, as the chief's orders rang out to the crew of Volley Two.

Then Havens drove swiftly over to the idle, excited young Neptunes.

"What are your fellows doing, Gerald?" bawled the chief.

"Can't do anything with their hose cut, sir," Dick shouted back. "So we're waiting for your orders. We'll take pikes or axes, or do anything you want with Volley Two."

"Hose cut?" gasped Mr. Havens, in amazement.

"We suspect Mason of slashing it in the fire-house," Dick explained, hurriedly. "We also caught him here setting the depot afire."

Chief Havens was too astounded to speak for an instant.

But he leaped out of his buggy, coming curiously toward the little group.

"What's all this outrageous nonsense?" demanded Chief Havens.

Dick told the story in so few and such crisp sentences that it seemed to take him but a part of a minute.

"Mason!" cried Chief Havens. "It don't seem as if it could be true!"

"You don't doubt our word, I hope?" queried Dick.

"No, no! I can't. But here's Police Chief Graney. This is his business. You and Pond stay here, Gerald, to explain to Chief Graney. The rest of you Neptunes get your axes and pikes and follow me back to the fire."

Chief Graney came up, and heard in intense astonishment.

"This looks pretty tough, Mason," declared the chief of police. "As it happens, Gerald and Pond are both known to be boys of good character. I can't refuse to take their charge. But have you anything to say?"

Fully a score of spectators, who were crowding around the little party, craned their necks to get the answer sooner.

"I'll have plenty to say, when the right time comes," replied Mason, angrily. "This is all a put-up job."

"Have you any statement to make of how you came to be here?" insisted Chief Graney.

"Not a word to-night."

"Then I'm sorry, Mason," went on the chief of police, "but it's my sworn duty to take you into custody now on a charge of arson."

"You arrest me?" gasped the young fellow, turning even paler.

"I've got to."

"But you know where to find me in the morning, Mr. Graney."

"The law doesn't allow me to operate that way, Mason. You're accused of a crime, and I've got to take you along now."

Two rather roughly dressed young fellows had been hovering uneasily on the edge of the little crowd.

But now one of them pushed his way through, dragging his companion by the sleeve.

"Hold on there, chief!" shouted the first of this pair.

"What have you got to say?" demanded Graney, wheeling upon this newcomer, and looking him over closely.

"Barney Glynn's my name," replied the stranger, quickly. "Me friend's name is Hod Ramp—Horace Ramp, that is."

"This is no time for introduction to people I don't care about meeting," returned the police chief, impatiently.

"But we've got something to say about this here affair," broke in Barney Glynn, decisively.

"Oh, you have? What have you got to say about it?"

"Me and me friend was right around here, and saw the whole trick played," affirmed Barney, unblushingly. "That young fellow," nodding at Mason, "seemed to be taking a walk down this way. Then we saw those two young fellows go up to him. They jumped him, got him down, and then we heard that one," pointing to Dick, "tell the other young feller that it was time to bring the crowd. With that, that young feller," pointing once more to Ted, "he got up and dusted for the alarm box. On his way back he

sprinkled oil over the wall of the depot. Then the two of them held this young gentleman," indicating Mason, "until all you folks came. It was all a put-up job, but no one saw us until the crowd got here."

"Is this true?" demanded Graney, turning to Hod Ramp.

Ramp nodded, adding hoarsely:

"True, every word, so help me!"

"You liars!" gritted Dick, but he failed to take the matter very seriously, as he did not imagine these rough-looking fellows would be believed.

Graney wheeled upon Fred Mason, into whose eyes a new light of hope had come.

"What have you to say about this, Mason?"

Fred understood, perfectly, that these two young fellows, who looked enough like tramps, had recognized him as a wealthy young man, and that they had hatched up their "evidence" on the spur of the moment, with the certainty that they would be paid a handsome reward for their false swearing.

Yet this offered to Mason what appeared to be his only chance of keeping out of state prison.

So he leaped quickly enough at the bait.

"These young men, Glynn and Ramp, are telling the truth, every word of it," declared Fred Mason, huskily.

"And it all happened just as they say?" insisted Chief Graney.

"Yes, chief."

"Then why didn't you tell me all this before?" questioned the chief of police.

"Because, chief, I didn't know there were any witnesses at hand who would tell the truth. I had made up my mind, therefore, not to speak until I had consulted my lawyer."

But still Chief Graney looked puzzled.

"How did you happen to be out at this time of the night, Mr. Mason?" demanded the police official.

"Why, chief, I was troubled with restlessness. I simply couldn't get to sleep to-night. So, finally, I dressed, and came outdoors, to see if a run in the cool air wouldn't help me. I came down this way, and the first inkling I had of anything wrong was when these two sham firemen jumped out and knocked me down. After that things happened so swiftly that it took my senses away for awhile."

"And you'll swear to all this?" demanded the chief, insistently.

"Yes, chief."

"And you two?"—turning to the "witnesses."

"We'll swear to it every day in the week," proclaimed Barney Glynn.

"What do you make out of it, chief?" demanded Mr. Havens, driving back.

"Why, chief, there's plenty of testimony that your two young fire lads did this whole trick themselves, and tried to fasten the job on Mason."

"Surely, Mr. Graney, you don't believe that?" cried Dick, starting forward, his lower jaw dropping in his sudden consternation. It passed his belief that such testimony could be accepted.

"In the light of the evidence, I'm afraid I'll have to," replied Chief Graney.

Then the police official drew out a pair of handcuffs. He looked meaningly at our hero.

"Must you do that?" faltered Dick Gerald. And added, flashingly: "On the word of a pair of hoboies?"

CHAPTER VII.

"NOW, I'M READY TO BE LOCKED UP!"

Dick stood there, looking the picture of amazed despair. As for Ted Pond, his face looked whiter than any sheet. Neither boy felt like doing much talking.

Both fire lads realized how completely and cleverly the tables had been turned on them by a couple of worthless fellows, who were ready to swear to anything for the sake of money.

"I'm afraid I've got to put the handcuffs on," replied Chief Graney. "Arson is a serious crime, you know."

Dick held out his hands.

"I'm ready, then," he said, brokenly. "But I am innocent, and I hope to be able to prove it, in spite of this false swearing."

Looking rather sorry over his unwelcome job, Chief Graney unsnapped his manacles.

But Chief Havens now broke in, energetically:

"Chief, isn't it a rather unusual thing to arrest firemen at a fire? Especially a foreman and his assistant?"

Graney looked up in surprise.

"Don't you want these lads arrested, Havens?"

"Why, I'm not anxious about it, at least not until after the fire."

"I'll let them go until the fire is out, if you'll make yourself responsible, Havens," replied the police chief.

Chief Havens thought swiftly. Then he answered:

"Yes, I'll be responsible for 'em—until the fire's over." Graney dropped the handcuffs back into his pocket.

"Get on your jobs, boys!" he said, gruffly.

Turning to his own superior, Havens, Dick saluted.

"Thank you, chief. At your orders!"

"Get over there and take charge of your crew, then."

As Dick and Ted hurried away, wondering if it were all some horrible dream, night Policeman Stearns came up.

To that officer Graney turned over the two witnesses, instructing that they be locked up for the night, to make sure of their appearance in court in the morning.

But, before they went, Mason thanked both heartily for their "testimony."

As the young fellow shook hands with these rough-looking liars, he managed to slip a bank-note against the palm of each.

Glynn and Ramp both understood, perfectly, that this bank-note was but the first of many that would be paid them.

Over at the fire, the back of the depot was doomed. So was most of the roof.

As the ends of the walls nearest to the back, they had

got going, but now, with pike and axe, Neptunes and Volleys were staying the progress of the flames.

Still, the roof was yet blazing fiercely.

The ticket agent, who had been roused out of his sleep, succeeded in getting out the ticket rack, some books and the cash drawer.

The safe could not be moved, but it was believed that its contents would be secure even if the depot burned down.

Dick, who had just set his own pikemen and axemen at work to the best advantage, stepped back with Ted to see what else could be done.

Chief Havens stopped at their side.

"I'm mighty glad, boys, that there aren't a lot of buildings near," observed the old fire-fighter. "With such a wind going, and sparks flying so, it would mean mischief for us."

"It means mischief enough as it is," replied Dick, sadly.

"You boys are not really guilty?" demanded the chief, curiously.

"Of course we're not!"

"There, there! I believe you, by jinks I do!" rejoined the fire chief. "I wouldn't believe such a charge of either of you. It sounds queer enough against Mason, but he'd do it sooner than you would. I know that well enough."

"Well, of all the luck!" gasped Dick, suddenly, pointing up-track.

The bend was just above the depot, and coming around the bend, at this instant, a rather slow-moving locomotive headlight appeared.

"The down-freight!" gasped Havens.

"We had forgotten all about that, sir."

"Yes," groaned the fire chief, "and I should have sent a man up to signal it."

"They can't stop now, sir! They'd better crowd on steam and get by," advised Dick. "If the engineer stopped, several of his cars would be standing right under the flames. He can't stop before he gets here. Too long a train!"

"See here, Gerald, you try to make the engineer understand," directed Chief Havens, hotly. "I'll get up on the depot roof and do what I can to keep the sparks down."

Dick ran just past the platform, reaching there just before the freight locomotive did.

Out of the cab window leaned the engineer, looking decidedly bewildered.

"Get right on! Crowd on steam and speed!" bawled Dick, making a trumpet of his hands. "Get through and away as fast as you can. It's your best chance!"

Shouting this almost under the cab window, our hero managed to make the engineer of the slow-moving freight understand.

Great grunts came from the engine, as it rolled by.

But the train was so long that speed was a hard matter to increase in a jiffy.

Dick stood there, Ted beside him, watching the train go by at slightly increased speed.

Up on the roof of the depot Havens directed the fire-fighters.

Dick was watching out to see whether any of the flying sparks did reach an inflammable part of the train.

The train was about half by, when our hero noted a car the side door of which was partly open.

Two tramps stood peering out of the door at the blaze-lit scene—wonder and fear in their eyes.

A sudden gust drove a shower of sparks past them, in through the open door of the car.

Then, as that car rolled past the end of the depot, Dick and Ted saw the tramps throw the door wide open and leap to the ground.

After them belched out a cloud of smoke and sparks.

"Hay!" sniffed Dick. "And, oh, Ted, the tank-cars!"

Just behind the hay-laden car that was afire rolled, in file, three huge tank cars, heavily laden with coal-oil.

"There'll be the deuce to pay, if something isn't done!" whispered Dick, in Ted's ear. "Follow me—like a flash!"

Dick made a leap, and got a footing in a side loop of iron that hung under the forward end of the box-car, just behind the last tank-car.

"Here, none of that!" roared Chief Graney, seeing, as he thought, his captives trying to escape. "Come back here!"

But Dick was swinging from the loop around on to the narrow brake platform, while Ted, hopping alongside, was waiting for his turn to mount.

Bang! Chief Graney's bullet whistled between them.

Then Dick disappeared around on the brake platform, while Ted, intent only on following his leader, swung up in pursuit.

Bang! again. But Ted was neither stopped nor hit.

He found Gerald climbing over on to the tank car.

In another twinkling Ted was following his chum and leader over the line of three tank cars.

It was slippery, dangerous work, but no more dangerous than much that the fireman has to do.

At the forward end of the foremost tank-car Dick halted his quivering friend.

"Ted, stay right here, if your nerve holds out," proposed Dick. "Watch until the train bumps back. Then let the coupling fly. As soon as you do that, work the brake for all you're worth. If you have chance to signal the train crew behind, get them to work the brakes, too!"

Sure that his friend understood, and would act, Dick himself passed swiftly to the brake platform of the burning hay-car.

Whatever was to be done must be done in almost seconds, and with the greatest risk of life.

With the strong wind, the motion of the train and the amount of air that there was in the hay-car, it might be a solidly blazing mass within the next sixty seconds.

Dick fairly raced up over that car to the forward end, running the footboard as swiftly as if it were a city sidewalk.

Down to the forward brake platform he descended, steadying himself between the two cars.

Almost immediately there came a bump that brought the two cars closer together.

Watching for that moment, ready to act, Dick Gerald slipped the coupling.

Then up he climbed, stationing himself at the brake.

He gave it a few turns, slowing up the blazing car, which already began to feel decidedly hot under his feet.

He had the satisfaction of seeing the forward portion of the train pull on slightly away from the hay-car.

Then Dick looked backward.

He saw, with a glow of satisfaction, that Ted had succeeded in uncoupling the tank-car from the hay-car.

But still the tank platform came on, perilously close to the hay-car.

"The brake signals are going back," throbbed Dick, as he watched. "They'll soon get the tanks and the rest of the train to a standstill."

Standing there, Dick soon began to realize what a fierce affair a hay fire is.

Strangling and coughing, and the soles of his feet feeling as if they were being roasted, he did not yet dare to desert his post.

"If I put on the brake now and jumped, I'd leave this blazing heap for the tanks to run right into," he reflected. "No; I've got to stick it out until I see those tanks at a standstill. Whew! What a blow-out there'd be if the tanks came head-on into this monster tinder-box!"

So Dick stuck to his brake, though he wondered how much longer he could do it and live in all the heat, and with the flames forcing their way through the roof of the car.

A bit at a time the tanks, and the heavy line of freights behind, seemed to be slowing up under all the resolute braking that was being done along the line.

Dick's head began to whirl and reel.

His eyes were smarting so with all the smoke that poured into them that he could no longer see very distinctly to the rear.

But at last he saw a lantern describe a dozen wide circles.

"That's good old Ted, signalling with some body's lantern," throbbed the half-suffocated young fireman. "Thank goodness—at last!"

Now, he bent over his own brake, turning and twisting with all his might.

But a fit of violent coughing interfered.

When Dick tried to put in more strength, the coughing came on all the harder.

"See here, I can't perish at this!" he muttered, fearfully, and threw all his last remaining strength into the effort of whirling the brake.

At last, glancing down at the ground, he had the satisfaction of seeing that the blazing hay-car had all but stopped.

"It's time to get out of this," quivered the boy, and stepped anxiously down the ladder.

Iron rails and wooden car wall were red-hot under his hands, so it seemed.

But, at last, Dick fell off the car rather more than he leaped off.

As he picked himself up, safe, and backed away from the dense clouds of smoke pouring from the doomed car, Ted ran up to him.

"We've done it!" growled young Pond.

"Yes; I guess we have," uttered Dick, dully, as he stood looking at their work, which represented the saving of a freight train and its cargo."

"That was great work, boys!" called Chief Graney, hurrying up to them. "But I thought you were trying to get away. Sorry I shot at you."

"Did you shoot at us?" inquired Dick.

"Yes; didn't you hear the bullets go past you?"

"I thought I did."

"And that didn't stop you?"

"Nothing would stop me," Dick answered, "when I've got a fire to fight."

Turning, the boys walked back with the police official.

Within the next quarter of an hour the fire at the depot was over.

Volley Two had done much more in saving the building than they had hoped to do.

And, in the meantime, the trainmen had got their situation in hand.

They were letting the hay-car burn out by itself on the track, while a telegram had been sent for a wrecking train to clear the hay-car from the track.

The recall sounded.

Taking Ted by the elbow, Dick wheeled and walked over to where Graney stood.

"Now, I'm ready to be locked up, chief," uttered our hero.

"Me, too," added Ted, drily.

"It's a job I'm beginning to hate to do," muttered Chief Graney. "Still, I reckon I've got to do it."

"I reckon you have, sir," Gerald admitted.

Mason was no longer in sight.

At last that rascal had had the grace to take himself off the scene.

Dick and Ted were not handcuffed, now, nor were they led away until all the young Neptunes had had time to shake their hands.

CHAPTER VIII.

A GIRL'S FRIENDSHIP.

By nine o'clock the next morning there were many in Blackton who had heard no word of what had happened to the leaders of Neptune One.

Promptly at that hour the two young prisoners were in court, after an almost sleepless night, spent on the hard benches of the police station cell.

Dick's parents were there; so were Ted's. All of these

good people were dazed by the news, yet convinced, of course, of the innocence of their sons.

Mason and his "witnesses" told their lying stories.

Dick and Ted, acting under the advice of the lawyer secured by their fathers, merely pleaded not guilty.

"Case held over for a fortnight, to enable the defense to make its plans," announced the judge.

But each youngster was held in five thousand dollars' bail.

"I'll do my best to get the bail for you, Dick," promised his sorrowing father. "But I'm afraid I can't."

Ted heard about the same report from his father.

Then the two youngsters were led back to their cell.

It was eleven o'clock that morning when May Everard heard the news through a chance girl caller.

May pumped her visitor dry of news about the affair, then excused herself and ran in to tell her mother.

"Then they may not be as nice young men as you thought them last evening," suggested Mrs. Everard, gently.

"Nonsense, mamma," cried May. "I'm afraid Fred Mason would just about do such a thing when angry. I'm sure it's all a miserable plot."

"Well, we know nothing about it, and can do nothing in the matter," replied her mother, as if that settled it.

"We can't do anything?" May repeated. "Why can't we at least furnish bail?"

"What—for two entire young strangers, May?" asked her mother, quickly.

"Since I saw Gerald make that splendid rescue last night, I hate to think of him as a stranger," May replied, eagerly. "And then think of that daring work with the freight-car, while others didn't know what to do, or dare to do it."

"But what can you do now, child?"

"I'm still thinking about that matter of bail, mamma," persisted the girl, looking doubly charming in her very honest distress over Dick's misfortune.

"But you haven't any real estate, with which to go bail, child," smiled Mrs. Everard.

"But you have, mamma."

"Suppose I have, May?"

"Then go their bail, please!"

"Good gracious! For strangers?"

"No, mamma, for a friend of mine," replied the girl, pleadingly.

Mrs. Everard shook her head very decidedly.

But May was the only being she loved on earth. Moreover, May had a very coaxing way with her mother, and it usually won.

It did in this instance.

"Oh, very well, child," sighed her mother, almost irritably at last; "tell Parker to order the carriage at once, and I'll drive into town and see Mr. Stacey, my lawyer, about it."

May went on the jump to order the carriage. Then she swiftly arrayed herself in street costume, and drove into town with her mother.

Shortly before one o'clock Lawyer Stacey, a stout, rather pompous middle-aged man who always wore black, appeared, in company with the jailer, before the cell door that separated the boys from their freedom.

"Young men, I am glad to be able to announce that you have been admitted to bail," declared the lawyer, in much the same tone that he would have read a weather report.

"Then my father found some one?" queried Dick, eagerly, as he stepped to the cell door. "Or was it Ted's father?"

"Mrs. Everard has gone surely for you both," replied the lawyer, in the same uninterested tone.

He walked with the delighted boys as far as the door of the lock-up.

Then to Dick he handed an envelope, saying:

"I was requested to hand you this, Gerald."

Dick took the note in wonder. He opened the envelope, and read the enclosure:

"Dear Mr. Gerald," the note ran, "of course your first duty is to go to the dear ones at home. As soon as you can, this afternoon, however, I shall be glad if you can make it convenient to call upon yours sincerely, May Everard."

"What is it?" asked Ted, very curiously.

Lawyer Stacey had already stalked away.

"Miss Everard has invited me to call," Dick answered.

"My, but you're playing in luck!"

"Any fellow is in luck if he arouses Miss Everard's interest in him," Dick replied, honestly.

"You're going up to see her?" Ted asked.

"That's a sensible question to ask, isn't it, old fellow?"

"Pardon me, Dick. Of course it was a fool question. Well, I envy you."

On the street, on his way home, Dick encountered his worried-looking father.

Mr. Gerald had taken the day off in what looked like a hopeless effort of raising bail.

Now, father and son hurried home together, and a family jubilation was held over this unexpected good luck.

"But we mustn't be selfish and keep you here, Dick dear," urged his mother. "Since the Everards have been so wonderfully kind, you must go to any trouble to please them. I will go up to your room now and lay out your best things. Dress yourself with care, and then go right up there to thank Miss Everard and her kind mother."

"I guess it's the daughter who is kind, principally," thought Mr. Gerald, with a smile. "I don't blame her if that's the case, either. There isn't a finer or more manly-looking fellow in town than Dick. His father was never as good-looking a youngster."

Mr. Gerald waited until he saw Dick coming downstairs looking at his best.

Then the old man took his son's hand for an instant.

"Don't get your head turned by the young lady's kindness, my boy," he counselled. "Don't imagine, just be-

cause she has asked you to call, that you're the prince in the fairy story."

"I'm not. I know that," admitted Dick, candidly. "But, Dad, when you see Miss Everard, you'll be willing to swear that she's the princess, all right."

Dick set off in the highest spirits.

Though the charge of a crime still hung over his head, it was a great deal to be out of that loathsome cell, and he did not propose to borrow trouble ahead.

Miss May received him alone, in a handsome, cosey little music room just off the drawing room.

It was the first time that Dick Gerald had ever been among such luxurious surroundings.

A less self-possessed boy might have been awkward, especially with Miss May smiling at him and looking so altogether charming.

"You have been very kind to come so soon," greeted May, as she extended her hand.

"Kind?" repeated Dick, simply. "Miss Everard, the kindness has been all on the part of your mother and yourself. How can I ever thank you?"

"There is nothing to thank us for," Miss May replied.

"Not even that bail?"

"That cost mamma nothing, for you are not going to run away, are you?"

The girl looked at him with the greatest friendliness, her eyes as laughing as her voice.

"Run away?" cried Dick, growing almost confused. "I should say not! I trust that I don't know how to run away from a false charge."

"That's the way I like to hear you talk," cried the girl, as she motioned Dick into a chair.

He stood beside it, however, until she had seated herself.

"Mamma will be down in a few moments," she explained. "Now, Mr. Gerald, would you think me too curious if I asked you to give me your side of this whole miserable affair?"

"Too curious?" repeated Dick, simply. "Why, Miss Everard, I am only too glad to talk it all over with one who has shown herself so kind as you have been."

Yet, at the very outset, he hesitated.

He had often heard Fred Mason's name linked with hers.

"I—I don't know how to start," he began, confusedly. May understood in an instant.

Dick Gerald at once rose ten notches in her opinion for his unwillingness to attack the man who was reputed to be her favored admirer.

"I understand," she said, quickly. "But if you are to tell me what happened, you must tell it, no matter whom you have to denounce."

"I don't want to denounce——"

"Mr. Mason?" May helped him out.

"Not to you."

"Why? Because I am supposed to like Mr. Mason? Well, I did, greatly, until last night, anyway."

"And now——?" Dick hinted in a hushed tone.

"I—I don't know. My opinion may be changed by what I learn."

"Then I don't want to say anything, if you please," Dick begged.

He had a horror of intruding himself in what he thought might be only a lovers' quarrel.

Had Mason been present, he would have spoken freely, perhaps, but it seemed a dastardly thing to run down even a scoundrel before his sweetheart, when that scoundrel was not present to speak for himself.

"I will put you more at your ease, then, Mr. Gerald," went on the girl, looking down at the carpet. "I am no longer as much interested in Mr. Mason as I am in seeing you prove that your good name is up to the standard of your good deeds."

Dick gasped inwardly, glancing at her with a swift look of surprise.

"Tell me the whole story, please, just as it happened," she urged.

"Then you will, at least, do me the favor of asking Mason for his side of it?" asked the boy, awkwardly.

"I will—in case I am ever interested enough to care to know Mr. Mason's version," was the guarded reply.

Then, though not without much urging, coaxing and prompting, Dick laid bare his side of the outrage against him.

May listened with the closest sympathy.

"Now, I will tell you something," she said. "I asked Mr. Stacey to have one of his clerks look up those two disreputable characters who came forward to swear to Mr. Mason's innocence. Just before you came the clerk telephoned me. You know, of course, that a lawyer gave bail this morning for their appearance as witnesses?"

"I had heard something of it," our hero admitted.

"They not only have been bailed, but those toughs have come out in what is for them gorgeous new raiment. They are wearing, probably, the best clothes that they ever owned in their lives. More than that, they are around town spending a lot of money in drinking, and in buying drink for others whom they meet. What do you make of that?"

"May I ask you what you make of it?" suggested Dick.

"Why, it's as plain as the flag-staff on the common," May went on earnestly. "Those toughs stepped forward last night, figuring it out that Mason would pay them well. He has evidently done so already. They will continue to draw money from him. The toughs intend to live as near like lords as they know how to."

"Then you believe my side?" Dick asked, gratitude for this trust surging up in his heart.

"Of course I do," May replied, eagerly. "Otherwise, do you think mamma and I would have interested ourselves in the matter in the first place?"

A servant entered, handing Miss May a card.

She glanced at it, her color heightened, and she handed back the card, adding:

"Say to Mr. Mason that I am engaged for the afternoon."

Then, as the servant started to leave the room, she called him back, saying:

"You may add that I am engaged with Mr. Richard Gerald!"

The servant left the room.

An instant later the two young people heard the front door close with a vicious bang.

CHAPTER IX.

"I'M GOING TO RUN YOU OUT OF TOWN!"

Miss May touched a bell, and the servant re-entered.

"Wilson, you may say to Mr. Mason, at any time that he calls, that I am out."

"This is more than a lovers' quarrel," murmured astonished Dick.

He could not understand why Miss May had taken such a sudden interest in himself.

But the reason was a good and sound one.

May Everard was not impressionable enough to have fallen in love with the young fireman at first sight.

But she did love heroes. She had an intense admiration for clean-cut, manly young fellows.

Dick, being wholly down on his luck, she was just the sort of girl to long to step in and befriend him, and to see him occupy the place in the world to which she believed his manliness entitled him.

After a little Mrs. Everard came in.

She greeted Dick graciously enough, and treated him kindly.

Yet, despite her kindness, it was plain that she was doing this to gratify her daughter's latest "whim," as her mother termed it in her own mind.

If Dick had not been around much in the world, he had more good sense than to stay too long, fascinating though he found May Everard every moment of the time.

So, presently, he took his leave, after again expressing his intense gratitude to them both.

May, alone, followed him to the door.

"Keep up your good heart! You'll win!" she whispered, smiling clearly and sweetly into his eyes.

Dick hurried homeward, in a trance of happiness.

Yet he had gone hardly an eighth of a mile on the quiet country road, when, at a bend, he came face to face with Fred Mason.

Our hero would have passed, without a word, but his enemy would not have it.

"So?" demanded Mason, sneeringly. "You are trying to mix in with your betters?"

"What do you mean?" Dick asked, bluntly, looking straight in the other's eyes.

"You know what I mean; Miss Everard——"

"I can't discuss her with you," Dick retorted curtly.

Then he side-stepped, to get around Mason and go on his way.

"You confounded young cad and booby!" hissed Mason. "I'm going to run you out of town!"

Dick heard, but he made no answer.

Having gotten past Mason, he hurried along.

"It looks as if he were trying to pick another row with me, to put me in the wrong in other peoples' eyes," quivered Dick, as he hurried along. "I'm not going to drop into any such trap as that."

But he smiled, grimly, as he thought of his enemy's threat.

"Going to drive me out of town, is he?" He hasn't taken the trouble to measure his man, then! He can't drive me out of town—unless he succeeds in his dastardly scheme to put me in prison!"

Cheered by his interview with May Everard, the young fireman was almost happy by the time that he reached home.

To his surprise, he found his father, in his shirt-sleeves, seated in the kitchen, smoking and with a thoughtful look on his face.

"Why, Dad," cried the boy, "I thought you'd go back to work when you found that I was out of that cell."

"I did go back to the mill," responded his father.

His tone indicated bad news coming.

"Why, what happened, then?" breathed Dick, fearfully.

"Mr. Hampden sent for me to come to his office. Told me I wasn't needed any longer. Wouldn't give me any reasons. Paid me for the rest of the week—and here I am."

"Why, this is Fred Mason's work!" blazed Dick, angrily.

"I guess it is," nodded Mr. Gerald. "Mason's father and Mr. Hampden are pretty good friends."

Dick felt dazed.

Yet, as he thought it over, he wondered that Fred Mason hadn't thought, before, of this easy means of spiting his young enemy.

"He said he'd drive me out of town," quivered Dick, inwardly. "I wonder if this is his way of doing it?"

Mr. Gerald looked too worried to care to talk.

So Dick excused himself, and hurried outdoors.

He wanted to be in the fresh air, to take a long walk and think the whole train of disastrous happenings over.

Hardly realizing where he was going, he took the direction toward Main Street.

Here he encountered Ted Pond.

"I'm just taking a little stroll for pleasure," declared Ted, grimly. "I'm getting some gloomy fun out of keeping an eye on the very truthful gentlemen who are helping Mason out."

Ted nodded down the street.

Yes, there were Barney Glynn and Hod Ramp.

At first glance, Dick would hardly have known them.

Their seedy clothing had disappeared. In its place they wore what must have been the loudest apparel on sale in Blackton.

To the clothing they had added a great swagger, at first.

But an afternoon of rather heavy drinking had gradually changed the swagger into something very close to a stagger.

"Just think of any judge or jury taking the word of fel-

lows like that!" uttered Ted, disgustedly. "Oh, Dick, just give 'em rope enough and they'll hang themselves instead of convicting us!"

"Mason ought to take better care of two such valuable young fellows," smiled Dick, savagely.

The two young firemen simply could not help following the two toughs in whom their own fortunes were so sadly tangled.

Apparently willing to admit that they had had enough to drink for the present, Glynn and Ramp, tipsily arm-in-arm, had left the busy part of Main Street behind.

They were now going, unsteadily, over the bare spot that lay between the business section of Blackton and Hampden's Mills, down by the river.

"Maybe they like the town so well that they've decided to settle here," mimicked Ted. "I wonder if they're going down to the mill to ask for jobs?"

"They're a bit late if they are," Dick replied, glancing at his watch. "It's pretty near time for the whistle to blow."

Glynn and Ramp kept straight on, passing through the mill gateway and into the yard.

The boys followed, curiously, as far as the gate.

"Deaf and dumb people always like to walk on the railroad tracks," muttered Dick, "and intoxicated men always seem to want to get close to deep water if there's any around."

For Glynn and Ramp had kept on until they stood beside the raceway.

Here the water dashed swiftly and deeply through its channel, rushing on to the fall, over which it fell against the great wheel.

That big wheel was still churning furiously, for, though it was almost whistle-blow, there was a night shift that worked until midnight.

"You can't box! Ye never could!" taunted Barney Glynn, hoarsely.

"The blamed fools!" quivered Ted.

For now the tipsy pair were clumsily boxing right at the edge of the raceway.

Then they clinched, toppled, and rolled into the raceway.

"They're in—they'll drown!" cried Dick, aghast for the moment.

Then, tossing off his jacket, he started on a desperate sprint just as the whistle blew.

"Come on, Ted!" he shouted.

Ted was after him like a shot. He always followed his chum-leader.

Both boys poised for the dive at the edge of the raceway.

A score or more of mill-hands were also racing for the spot.

"Here, here, boys! Don't do it!" bellowed a man. "You'll go down to your deaths!"

"There they are!" quivered Dick, as he espied two frantically struggling figures in the water, drifting close to the steep fall. "Come on, Ted! We can get 'em—I think!"

Splash! Dick shot down head foremost into the churning, foaming water.

CHAPTER X. "MASON WINS!"

Splash!

Ted Pond was hardly a second behind his leader. Both came up to the surface for an instant to look about. "Get Ramp—he's the lighter!" called Dick, in a low tone.

Above them, at the bank of the raceway, stood an awed crowd of forty men that was increasing every second.

"Get a rope!" bawled one of the crowd.

"Get some planks!"

"Poles!"

As usual, there were plenty of people to bellow orders and few with the presence of mind to carry them out.

Nor did any one know just where to find a rope, plank or pole.

Dick had spotted Barney Glynn just as that worthy bobbed up to the surface.

Plunge! Dick got him, grabbing him by the collar.

In twenty seconds more the drunken lout would have gone over the fall.

Now, Dick, struggling with all his might, swam stubbornly back against the current.

"Leggo me!" roared Barney, sobered somewhat by the cold douche of water, but fightingly obstinate.

"Keep cool and I'll get you out of this," panted Dick.

"Ye're tryin' to drown me!" screamed Barney, in a frenzy of fear.

"Keep quiet, can't you?" appealed Dick. "Stop struggling."

But Glynn, in his panic, wrapped his arms around Dick.

Now our hero was all but helpless, his thrashing legs, however, keeping him at the surface.

Together, locked as they were, they drifted again toward the fall.

Above, on the bank; men screamed themselves hoarse.

"Let go of the loafer!" roared one man.

As if Dick could do that, wrapped as he was in that despairing embrace.

But Dick, white-faced as he realized the almost certainty of his death by going over the fall, did manage to free his right hand.

Clenching his fist, he struck Barney Glynn squarely and forcefully between the eyes.

Barney gave up with a gasp, his eyes closing.

Now Dick, almost at the verge of going over, made another gallant fight.

Ted Pond was having better luck.

Hod Ramp, scared into a sort of paralyzed condition, was putting up no fight.

Indeed, that hobo seemed to have lost all the use of his body through fright.

For a few dizzy instants Dick and his senseless man hovered close to the brink.

All Dick's fighting would not seem to gain him an inch. He could still have saved himself, now, by letting go of Glynn.

But that he would never think of doing.

Now that he had undertaken the task, it must be both saved, or neither!

Then, with a prayer, and a new, more desperate spurt, Dick found that he was gaining by inches against the strong tide of the raceway.

Two men had tied their coat-sleeves together, and had lowered this sort of a rope to Ted, who, resting more easily by holding to one of the sleeves, was also supporting Ramp until those above could devise some way of helping Ramp out of the water.

And Dick was gaining now, too, but with desperate slowness.

He shuddered to think what would happen if he experienced a cramp, or if Barney suddenly revived in that cold, swirling water.

Dick, too, was at least eight feet out from the high bank, from which so many friendly hands stretched helplessly.

He tried to swim slantingly, so as to get up-stream and towards the bank at the same time.

"Here you are! Try to make it, Gerald!" shouted a man, kneeling and angling with another rope hastily made by tying the sleeves of two coats together.

Thirty seconds more of hard, baffling fight for life, and Dick reached one of the sleeves, gripping it despairingly with his left hand.

But, to his horror, he felt that his strength was fast leaving him!

"There, of course!" bawled some one above. "The only man among us who had sense!"

Dick felt a sudden easing in the tugging of the water around him.

One man had lowered the flood-gate, shutting off the escape of the water over the fall.

In almost still water, now, Dick managed to float easily, still gripping that sleeve with one hand, and Barney Glynn's coat collar with the other.

Then, presently, some one brought ropes, and the two half-drowned wretches were hoisted up out of their peril.

Right after that the rescuers themselves were saved.

"Three cheers for the pluckiest boys in Blackton!" roared an excited man. "Give 'em with a will now!"

And with a rousing will the cheers were given.

Ramp, only half-sobered, lurched up to his feet.

There he stood, bowing laughably.

"Zhen'l'men! zhen'l'men!" he protested. "You do me too much—too—much—honor!"

"Get out, you tipsy loafer!" yelled one of the mill-hands.

Gripping Hod Ramp by his collar and the seat of his loud-patterned trousers, the mill-hand gave Ramp a swift, not gentle, run towards the gate.

It was, perhaps, the quickest way in the world to further the sobering of the hobo.

Certainly it was the best way to get him away from the dangerous raceway.

Barney had come partly to by this time, and lay on the ground gasping, not an object of much sympathy.

But a score of men were trying to grasp Dick Gerald by the hand at the same time.

Others were almost mobbing Ted Pond in order to express their admiration.

"But, see here, Dick," roared one friend of our hero's father, "what sort of judgment have you got? You go to all this trouble and danger, just to save the lives of the two rascals who are trying to send you to prison for something that you didn't do?"

"Sure!" chimed in some one else. "That was a fool trick! Why didn't you let them drown, lad? 'Twould have saved you a heap of trouble."

"I don't quite see how we could quite do that," smiled Dick, shaking his head. "A fireman's whole training and instinct as to save life. It would be tough to stand by and see a dog drown. I couldn't let a human being go that way."

"Well, you'll see how much gratitude you'll get for it," proposed one man, grimly.

Dick began to shake with the cold of his thorough wetting.

"I reckon I've got to get home and get a rub-down," he declared. "You, too, Ted."

"I'll run you a race to warm up," proposed Pond.

Together they sprinted out of the mill yard, followed by a volley of cheers for their grit, though most of the on-lookers thought that the boys had taken a foolish lot of risk under the circumstances.

Barney heard the cheering as some one helped him to sit up.

"What's the row?" he asked hoarsely.

"That," growled a man who was standing over him, "is cheering for the two boys you're trying to swear behind bars."

"What did they do?"

"They brought you and your equally worthless friend out of that raceway, where you were drifting to death!"

The story of the nervy rescue spread around Blackton like wildfire.

But there were many knowing ones, as there always are. "Grand-stand play," sneered some one.

"The boys did that, hoping that Glynn and Ramp wouldn't swear against 'em," said the other equally knowing ones.

As a rule, whenever one is accused of a serious crime, a large proportion of the people in the community at once believe him guilty.

It was so in this instance.

Fred Mason was prominent and wealthy.

There were a good many people who would take his word,

at any time against that of two boys like the foreman and assistant foreman of Neptune One.

Within twenty-four hours Mayor Sharp had begun to feel strong pressure from people who insisted that he should disband the crew of boy firemen.

People insisted that they could not think of the possibility of having boys come into their home led by two officers who had been charged with the fearful crime of arson.

"Those boys haven't been convicted yet," retorted the mayor, bluntly. "Under our laws every one is innocent until he has been proved guilty."

"Haven't Gerald and Pond been pretty well proven to be guilty?" demanded the kickers.

"Not by the courts," maintained the mayor.

Then Mason's father, who was something of a power in local affairs, got some of his most influential friends to wait upon Mayor Sharp and demand that the boys be bounced out of the fire department.

"Not until the courts pass judgment," retorted the fat little mayor.

He was an independent man and all this pressure served to make him more obstinate.

He ordered new hose for Neptune, and had the locks changed on the door of the fire-house.

More than that, he gave night Policeman Stearns strict orders about watching for prowlers around Neptune's home.

But, if the pressure failed in this direction, it did not in others.

Dick's father tramped wearily over the town, seeking first one employer and then another.

But all had the same message for the discharged man.

They were very sorry. He was a good and reliable man, and they would like to give him employment, but they simply hadn't any position open.

"I'm feeling the influence of young Mason's father at every step, I guess," Mr. Gerald reported, mournfully, to Dick's mother.

To the boy neither of the parents said anything about this.

"Dick has his own serious troubles," said Mr. Gerald. "If we let him feel, any more than he does, that my loss of work came through him, and must continue through him, the poor lad would worry himself sick."

But Dick, though he said nothing, knew well enough how matters were going.

Then Dick's father was away for two days.

He came back, at the end of that time, looking decidedly more cheerful.

Around him he gathered his wife, little Nell and our hero.

"Well, I guess we can look up a bit, family," began Mr. Gerald, smiling over the good news that he had to impart. "I've got a position at last, and a fairly good one it's going to be, I think."

Dick stood waiting in silence for the news.

"It's over at Grangetown, about fifty miles away from here," Mr. Gerald went on.

"And we're going to move over to Grangetown?" Dick asked, very quietly.

"Yes, lad. That's the first step we have ahead of us now — to move."

"Then Mason wins," observed Dick, with a queer smile. "Mason?"

"Fred Mason, I mean, Dad."

"How does he win?"

"Why, he bragged that he'd run me out of town, and now he's going to do it. He and his father spoiled you, Dad, from getting work here. Yes; Mason wins!"

It looked like it!

CHAPTER XI.

PATSEY ON THE JOB!

"Yes, I guess he wins, then," sighed Mr. Gerald. "Unfortunately, I have to earn a living."

"Of course," nodded Dick.

"Try to get over your disappointment somehow, lad."

"Oh, I haven't seen my last of Blackton," smiled Dick, sadly. "I'll have to come back to face my trial, anyway."

All hands sighed at that allusion.

For it had become well-known that the heroic rescue-work in the mill raceway had not in any way changed the situation.

Barney Glynn and Hod Ramp seemed proof against considerations of gratitude.

They were still around town, declaring as loudly as ever that they had witnessed the boys' attempt to fasten their own crime on Fred Mason.

The pair continued to have plenty of money to spend, which was proof enough to Dick that Fred Mason was proving highly generous with the rascally pair.

"We won't get ready for the moving to-day," decided Mr. Gerald. "We can take things easy for the rest of this day, and to-morrow morning we can start in with the packing of our things."

Dick glanced at his watch; it was just after half-past three.

"Then, if you don't need me, Dad or Mother, I'm going out for a little while."

"Run along, lad," agreed Mr. Gerald, after a glance at his wife.

Dick hastened upstairs. Here he dressed rather rapidly, though with as much care as he could.

For he had one plan left in his mind—a plan through which he thought there might be a bare hope of defeating Fred Mason's trick of driving him from Blackton.

Out in the street our hero's rapid walk soon took him in the direction of the handsome Everard mansion, on the outskirts of the town.

"I hope she's home," muttered the boy. "If she isn't, I'll leave a note saying that I'll come again this evening, for time is mighty short. She's been so mighty kind to

me that she may be willing, if she's able, to help me out again."

Arrived at the house, he hurriedly ascended the steps and rang the bell.

"Is Miss Everard in?" he asked of the servant who answered.

"I'll see," was the cautious response.

Dick was shown into the same music room where he had had the first interview.

He waited there for five minutes, then Miss May, looking more charming than ever, came lightly into the room.

"Oh, it was good of you to come this afternoon, Mr. Gerald," she cried, holding out her hand.

But whether this was merely the trained society way, or whether she really felt glad, was something that doubtful, miserable Dick wondered in his own mind.

"Miss May," he began, slowly, "I've come to ask a little favor, if it happens to be within your power."

"Oh, that is delightful!" she cried.

But she made him seat himself before she would listen.

As May sat looking at Dick her heart welled up with pity.

Earlier in the afternoon she had had a long talk with Lawyer Stacey, who had told her that the boys would surely be convicted of the crime with which they were charged.

Ordinarily such worthies as Glynn and Ramp might not be taken very seriously by a jury, but they were certain to be when their testimony backed up that of a young man of prominence and good reputation like Fred Mason.

"The boys may be innocent, as you declare, Miss Everard, but I can assure you that they are going to be convicted and sent behind the bars, unless some very different testimony comes forward in their behalf."

May was thinking of that veteran lawyer's honest opinion as she looked at Dick, who was finding such hard work in beginning.

"Come," she rallied, smilingly, "you are not afraid of me. What is it that you came to say, Mr. Gerald?"

"It is, rather, the person I have to talk about that makes it awkward," Dick replied, slowly.

His words were not coming as rapidly as he had hoped that they would.

"Mr. Mason?" challenged May.

"It is partly about him."

"Speak on, then. It won't hurt me to hear words against —Mr. Mason."

So Dick gathered courage, and hurried on:

"Mason made a boast to me, Miss Everard."

"A boast? What about?"

"He declared that he would drive me out of town."

"Well? Are you going to let him do it?"

"It almost looks as if I'd have to, Miss Everard."

Then, gaining still more courage, Dick plunged into an account of the trouble his father had had in finding other employment.

"And now," wound up young Gerald, "of course my father has his position at Grangetown, but I know that he

doesn't want to leave Blackton just now. Neither does my mother. It would look to them both as if they were running away because they didn't want to face people on account of my trouble."

"And you don't want to leave town, either?" asked May, sympathetically.

"Of course I don't like the notion of letting Fred Mason feel that he has driven me out of town, as he said he would."

"And so——?"

"Miss Everard, I came to you as the last chance. It struck me that your mother, being a wealthy woman, might have acquaintance with manufacturers nearer Blackton."

"And you want mamma to interest herself in getting some one around here to offer your father a position?"

"It looks awfully cheeky, I know," murmured Dick, flushing.

"Not in the least," May answered, readily. "You did right in coming here. You knew that I would be glad to serve you if I could. Thank you for coming. Now, let me see."

May was thoughtful for some moments, while Dick stared hard at the carpet.

"I'm going upstairs to see mamma about it all," announced the girl at last, rising. "Don't mind if I'm gone a little while. I'll be back as soon as I can."

She tripped lightly away.

After that, how the time dragged!

Truth to tell, Miss May was gone a rather long time. But, at last, she came back, and dressed for the carriage.

"I hope you don't feel that I intended to keep you waiting so long," she cried, as she re-entered the room. "But mamma and I have been having quite a long talk on the matter."

May did not add that she had had a hard time in persuading Mrs. Everard to interest herself in the matter at all.

"Mamma finally thought of Mr. Howe," May rattled on.

"Mr. Howe who owns the tool steel works?" Dick asked.

"Yes."

"My father applied there, but without success."

"It may be different when mamma goes to see Mr. Howe," smiled Miss May. "You see, it's a stock company, and mamma happens to own quite a little of the stock."

"But surely your mother is not going to trouble herself to go there?" cried Dick. "Wouldn't a letter or a telephone message do just as well?"

"Mamma is going to drive down to see Mr. Howe, and now," May affirmed, resolutely. "And she is going to do all in her power. The carriage is at the door, and we shall start as soon as mamma is downstairs."

"That's so good of you, Miss Everard," murmured the grateful boy. "And when shall I come to see you, to learn the result?"

"When? Why, you are going with us, of course."

"Drive down there with you in the carriage?" gasped Dick.

"Of course."

"Miss Everard, don't you realize that I'm accused of a very serious crime?"

"Of which you are innocent," the girl replied, promptly.

"But to be seen in your carriage——"

"Would simply inform Blackton of the view that Mrs. Everard and her daughter take as to your guilt," answered Miss May, firmly.

"I—I am afraid it wouldn't be right for me to accept your kindness to that extent," murmured Dick.

"Then you question our good sense?" challenged Miss May.

Her voice was rather stern, but there was a laugh in her eyes.

She was compelling Dick to go her way, just as she had done with her fond mother.

Dick gave a helpless sigh. Then, bowing, for he was standing, he answered:

"Miss Everard, I place myself in your hands, then."

"In my hands?" laughed the girl. "You must imagine me an athlete!"

Dick laughed, too, and then felt easier.

Mrs. Everard came sweeping down the stairs.

In the hallway Dick tried to murmur his thanks, but Mrs. Everard cut him short with a gracious smile.

"This is all May's affair. She is engineering it, and I am curious to see how she will make out."

Dick felt embarrassed as the carriage turned into the business part of Blackton.

Nearly every one who saw the carriage and its occupants turned to stare at them.

But Miss May held her head high, and seemed unconscious of any annoyance as she bowed to her acquaintances.

The carriage was going more slowly as they passed one of the dingier blocks on the street.

Then it passed one house which Dick knew for a lodging-house of the cheaper class.

Suddenly darting out of the door, on tiptoe, came Patsey Murphy of Neptune One.

Just at that instant he caught Dick's eye.

"Whoop!" he uttered, and turning, ran straight up to the side of the carriage.

"Oh, Dick! Dick!" cried the Irish boy, evidently struggling with considerable excitement that boiled within.

"What is it, Patsey?" asked Gerald, leaning forward.

Patsey thrust one hand up to his lips as he whispered back, mysteriously:

"Whisht! Oi'm on the job!"

"What?" echoed Dick.

Patsey was now walking beside the slowly moving carriage.

"What on earth does the boy mean?" questioned puzzled Mrs. Everard.

"I think, mamma, he's trying to make us understand that he has something very important to tell us."

"'Tis shmart ye are, miss!" cried Patsey, in honest admiration.

The driver glanced back at Mrs. Everard. At her nod he drew the carriage up beside the curb.

"Don't shtir!" begged Patsey, excitedly. "Wait till ye've hear-rd it all!"

Then, suddenly, as his glance roved up the street, Patsey let out another suppressed whoop.

He had just caught sight of Mayor Sharp, driving down the street in a buggy.

In a twinkling Patsey had stopped the mayor, and whispered excitedly to his honor.

Whatever the message was, the fat little mayor appeared to be a good deal interested.

More than that, he leaped out of the buggy and came along in Patsey's trail.

Almost breathless, from excitement rather than exertion, Patsey Murphy again raced to the side of the carriage.

"'Tis insoide Oi'll invite yez all," he throbbed, impatiently. "Oh, 'tis siv'ral days Oi've been on the job!"

He pointed toward the door of the lodging-house.

"You want us to go in there?" cried Mrs. Everard, in surprise.

"Af ye pleaze, ma'am. An', shure, Oi'm thinkin' ye'll be glad that ye did."

"I'm of young Murphy's opinion," nodded the mayor, lifting his hat as he gained the side of the carriage. "At least, ladies, if, as I take it, you are interested in the affairs of young Gerald."

CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

Miss May was the first one out of the carriage.

Dick followed her nimbly, though his head was in a whirl of wonder.

"Won't you come, madam?" questioned the mayor, politely. "It will be quite proper, I assure you. And I shall be there, as the mayor of the city."

Perhaps it was curiosity only that won May's mother over to the idea of entering that very shabby lodging house.

So she descended, assisted by Dick and the little mayor.

"Hurry, now," called Patsey, impatiently, though he spoke in a very low voice.

"This is a most extraordinary adventure," murmured Mrs. Everard to the mayor.

But that fat little official was not at her side.

He was over at the carriage, whispering to the driver:

"I think, my man, you had better come with us, if you can leave the horses."

With a respectful nod the driver sprang down from his box.

For an instant the mayor scanned the nearest citizens, as if seeking some one whom he could not find.

Then, with a bound, Mr. Sharp caught up with the party at the door.

"Shtep as aisly as ye can," cautioned Patsey, leading the party inside. "Walk loike ghosts, av ye can."

Mrs. Everard followed the others upstairs, treading softly.

Patsey led them softly down a not very sweet-smelling corridor on the second floor.

At the end he scratched softly on a door.

Without a sound the door opened.

Patsey stood there, his fingers on his lips as a sign for extreme stealth.

Large as the crowd was, the lad got them all into the room without noise.

Then, after "Dinny," who proved to be a large, raw-boned and very green-looking young Irishman, had softly closed the door, Patsey led the way on tiptoe across the room.

He halted at the wall, beckoning Dick.

Patsey made a sign of peeking through the wall.

Then, in the paper, our hero discovered several of the smallest kind of pin-holes.

Dick looked, and felt a wondering throb.

In the center of that other room was an oil heater, lighted.

Close to the stove sat Barney Glynn, a liquor bottle in one hand and a glass in the other.

Hod Ramp, smoking a costly cigar, was softly stepping back and forth in the room.

Facing them both, a fearful scowl on his face, was Fred Mason.

"Really," began Mason, as if resuming a conversation, "I don't know what to make of you fellows."

"I know what you have made of us," muttered Barney Glynn, in a low tone. "Liars! That's what! And nothing but our quick wit kept you from going to prison, where you're trying to send them poor boys."

"Don't talk so loudly," warned Mason.

"Don't be afraid," leered Barney Glynn. "Nobody's hearing us."

"Here you fellows have been living like lords," went on Mason, disgustedly. "You've had everything you could want."

"That's our business, Mason," proposed Barney, stiffly, while he eyed his victim leeringly.

"But you expect me to pay for it!"

"That's your job, Mason," declared Barney, impudently.

"I've given you fellows a thousand dollars apiece already," complained Mason.

"Perjury comes high, old man," jeered Barney.

"Suppose I refuse these new demands," hinted Mason, cunningly. "Suppose I simply say that I'll give you each another thousand after the trial is all over?"

"We'd run out of good things while waiting," returned Barney, coolly. "That we don't propose to do. And you ask us what we could do about it. Why, we could peach about the whole put-up job!"

Mason started, but he answered:

"That would put you behind bars, too."

"Not a bit of it," jeered Barney. "We could just write out a confession, take it to a notary and get him to take

our signatures. He wouldn't have to know what was in the paper. Then we could mail that paper to the district attorney and skip. We know how to keep under cover, Mason, when we have to.

"Do we get the money?" jeered Barney, after a pause.

"What's the least you'll take?" demanded Mason.

"Just what I told you before—another thousand apiece. And the money has to be handed to us the first thing in the morning. If it ain't, Mason, then look out for trouble!"

"Oh, I'll get you the money, boys," sighed Mason, disgustedly.

"And you can leave us a twenty apiece for to-night," hinted Barney, coolly. "Hod, me boy, it'll seem like being broke, to have only twenty to spend in a night, won't it?"

"See here," remonstrated Mason, as he thrust a hand into a trousers pocket and brought out a small roll of bills, "I wish you fellows wouldn't spend so freely in Blackton. It's getting me talked about already. Folks are beginning to wonder."

"Oh, that's all right," answered Glynn, winking. "You said you didn't want us leaving town for fear we'd get lost about the time you needed us. Now, Mason, if you're wise, you'll leave us to enjoy ourselves in our own way."

"Here's your two twenties," announced Mason, handing out the money.

Mrs. Everard, at another part of the wall, was taking in the strange scene.

So was the little mayor, at still another part of the wall. But now Mr. Sharp turned around to the coachman, and to the green Irishman who had been addressed as "Dinny." Both these men looked powerful enough.

There was a locked door between the two rooms.

Seeing no key there, the little mayor asked the two men, in dumb show, if they could break the door down.

Nodding, both men moved toward it.

"Make a job of it in one smash!" whispered Mayor Sharp, as the two men softly placed themselves in position.

At the silent signal the two strong men hurled themselves against the door.

Crash!

It gave in, in an instant.

"Hurray" yelled the little mayor, and hurled himself through the breach.

In the other room the three plotters seemed paralyzed for an instant.

Then Mason made a rush for the door out.

There, as he was on the point of darting through into the hallway, he caught sight of Miss Everard, whitefaced but smiling.

"May!" cried the young fugitive, hoarsely. "You sprung this trap on me! You, whom I loved, treat me like this!"

Then, with a muffled oath, he raised his right fist, clenched and sprang at her.

Dick and Patsey both leaped at him, but Dick got there first.

Our hero's fist landed crushingly on the fellow's neck, knocking him to the floor.

"Now, you coward," vibrated the boy, passionately, "you're past pity."

Bending, Dick seized Mason by the collar, and started dragging him out of the room.

Between them the young firemen hastily dragged the wretch out to the head of the stairs.

"Down with the worthless rubbish!" panted Dick.

Mason coasted, on his back, to the bottom of the stairs.

There, for an instant, he sat as if dazed.

Then, leaping to his feet, he bounded out of the building.

The two young firemen ran back into the rooms.

"Dinny" and the coachman had effectually collared Glynn and Ramp, and were holding them.

"I'll send the police in for these rascals," glowed the mayor. "But where's Mason?"

"We just threw him downstairs," Dick confessed. "He tried to strike Miss Everard."

"And you let him get away?" asked the mayor, amazed.

"I haven't any heart for arresting any one," Dick admitted. "I've suffered too much through that sort of thing myself."

"Oh, well, we'll know where to find him," nodded the mayor.

Miss May had taken possession of Patsey.

"How on earth did you make this lucky discovery?" she asked of him.

"Fished for it," replied Patsey, unconcernedly.

"What do you mean?"

"Tis me cousin, Dinny, shtandin' over there," replied Patsey, nodding at the raw-boned young Irishman. "He's just over from the ould countrhy, an' lookin' for a job. We was all full at our house, so he had to get lodgin's. 'Twas just at the toime av the throuble, so Oi happened t' think t' git him t' take this room, next to thim blaggards. Whin they was out Dinny put in his toime makin' thim little pinholes. Dinny an' me have been watchin'. Mason had just come in whin Oi raced out an' got you folks!"

Then Patsey was treated to a surprise that took his breath away and made him turn redder than the British flag.

For May Everard suddenly caught him and kissed him.

"Dinny" looked on hopefully, but Miss May swiftly recovered from her enthusiasm.

"I believe, madam," began the little mayor, to bridge over an awkward pause, "you will agree with me that it was well worth our while to come up here. Young Gerald has need of reputable witnesses to back up his story of anything that happened here."

"I am very well satisfied," replied Mrs. Everard, for which May gave her mother a grateful little hug.

"Oi just had t' nail thot feller Glynn," quivered Patsey, glaring at Barney. "'Tis the Oirish name he ran around wid, but he's no more Oirish than he's a Chinaman."

Glynn and Ramp were soon turned over to the police.

Fred Mason, however, by running straight to the ruins of the depot, caught a train and got away.

He's in exile now, living abroad, on money sent him by his broken-hearted old father.

On account of Mason's escape, Glynn and Ramp were allowed to get off with only a year apiece behind the bars.

Mason, afterward, in writing his father, declared that he had no notion of burning the depot down.

What he had wanted was simply to have the Neptunes respond with their slashed hose. He had hoped that the public would suspect the boys of having cut the hose themselves.

It was the sudden act of Glynn and Ramp which had forced young Mason into forcing the arson charge against the young officers of Neptune One.

After that exposure in the lodging-house the criminal charges against Dick and Ted were, of course, promptly dropped.

The elder Mason, in shame, promptly secured the reinstatement at the mill of Dick's father.

As for Dick, he secured a position in the selling department of the mill.

He never had any hope or thought, at the outset, of winning May Everard.

Yet, the young people came to be so much together that, at last, they found themselves necessary to each other.

They were married last Christmas.

Ted Pond is an assistant foreman at the mill, with a prospect of soon securing a foremanship.

Patsey is second in command in the shipping department, with a good show of promotion.

As for "Dinny," as he was a first-class gardener, he has been ever since in Mrs. Everard's employ.

But though Dick and Ted are now on the high-road to success, and though Dick has a wealthy young wife in addition, neither of these young officers of the fire lads' crew has ever tired of the good old work.

Both still respond to every alarm that calls out Neptune One.

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